

From the Darkness We Rise

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From the Darkness We Rise

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Summary

Twenty two years have passed since the defeat of Pitch, and Jack lives alone, touch-starved, with only the company of a solitary Nightmare. One evening the Man in the Moon sets him on a path that will lead him to unexpected relationships, draw the attention of the Guardians to a new coalition of villains, and challenge Jack's every notion of what it is to be good, evil, and what it is to live in the shadows.

Notes

Character death happens in this chapter folks; my apologies. This shall be a whump-heavy fic (mostly for Jack and Pitch).

Will contain details from both the books and the film.

Did you know that *From the Darkness We Rise* has been translated into Italian? If that's your preferred language and you want to go check it out, you can find it [HERE](#), many thanks to the hardworking efforts of [Venenix](#) for this!

From the Darkness We Rise is also being released chapter by chapter as a [Podfic!](#) Which is great news for people who like having things read to them, or cannot read large chunks of

text on the internet. Go give [Zaithat](#) some encouragement, it's hard work doing Podfics!

It's Time

At first it was disappointing, how easy it was to go back to feeling lonely after the sudden excitement of defeating the enemy, becoming a Guardian, being accepted into a loving group. It wasn't so much that the Guardians were cruel or mean, only that they were so deeply nourished by the belief of millions of children that they were quite content to only meet up as Guardians of the World when there was a crisis. And with Pitch defeated, there were few of those to deal with.

Bunnymund went back to painting his eggs and keeping his hunting skills fresh in the Australian wilds. North stayed focused on creating new toys and alchemically fantastic recipes. Toothiana was always busy, collecting children's teeth and memories, chatting with her Baby Teeth. And Sandy had a significant workload every evening, bringing good dreams to people, combating the Nightmares and living shadows that remained. He couldn't get to everyone, but he tried his hardest. He was always the last at any meeting, the first to leave, not willing to let any child go unnoticed if it was in his power.

So it simply happened that Jack went back to living alone, moving from place to place, creating ice and frost wherever he went. The glow of belief was a warm balm inside of him, but he was also aware that it was fragile. He did not have the benefit of the faith of millions, and when – two years after he had begun to be believed in – a child simply stopped and would not start again, he felt it as a light going off in his heart. That year he visited Jamie and brought him a snow day replete with sledding and snowball fights and it was so much fun he forgot that the reason he'd actually gone to see Jamie was that he wanted to remind himself that Jamie still believed.

But Jamie was faithful. Where the belief of other children was a candle light, Jamie was a hearth-fire, blazing all the way down in his cold body.

After a few more years, he finally decided to build himself a home. Well, 'appropriated' would be more accurate. He found an abandoned log cabin that he knew no one came to anymore, the paths to it had long since overgrown. He ripped off one of the walls so that it would be open to the capricious winds and patched up the remaining, rotting planks with liberal amounts of packed snow and ice. The cabin ended up a drafty, cold, windswept place, with frost decorating the wood and the panes of glass that remained.

At first, Jack had been proud of his creation. It was his first proper home for centuries. But one day he'd come back after thrilling his way through Siberia, and he saw it for what it was. A broken down old shack that looked cold and uninviting. The kind of place that no one in their right mind would consider a home. He thought of North's grand, complex Workshop with its bright, busy colours and how excited he'd been the first time he'd seen them. He thought of Toothiana's home, out in the open but still beautiful and harmonious, symmetrical and singing with craftsmanship. He stared at what he had made with dismay, and leaned tiredly on his staff. What was he doing wrong? Was it just that he didn't have the energy because not enough children believed? Maybe his imagination was only limited to doing exciting things with frost.

He thought maybe a frost castle, somewhere in the Arctic. But he was too impatient for it. If he wasn't rushing about on the winds, a heavy sadness began to overtake him. He had no time to weave a palace of frost. The shack would have to do.

The first time the Nightmare came to visit him, he wasn't actually asleep, and she was in her horse form, small and dainty. At first he was paranoid that Pitch has returned, and he raced all around her, looking, shouting that Pitch show himself. But the fear ebbed when the Nightmare whickered at him in amusement, and he stopped and stared at her. Shifting black sands, glowing eyes, she was

beautiful in her own way. She was well-formed, graceful and sleek. Sandy hadn't been able to find all of the Nightmares, and chances were he never would. They were in the world, and Jack kind of liked them. Not only that, but as days turned into months and Pitch never showed up, Jack accepted that the Nightmare was her own spirit and wanted to stay.

So the Nightmare became a companion, and with her company she brought painful dreams to him on the rare occasion that he slumped down in the bough of a great tree and slept. But they were bittersweet dreams, bringing his sister back to him. There had been wonder on the day he had died, the power of fun had revealed itself to him, but still; he had lost his sister on that day. The memories that Toothiana had returned to him of his human past twinged at his heart.

His memories of his sister were most vivid in dream, and he cherished seeing her face again, hearing her laugh. He found that he did not resent the Nightmare, and they became friends of sorts. Sometimes she even raced on the winds with him.

Two years later, they were galloping on the swelling waves over the Sea of Okhotsk in Russia, and he turned to her and shouted:

'I really should give you a name!'

The Nightmare nodded her head enthusiastically, mane tossing in every direction in the wind. Her magic kept up with his and they raced each other to the coast of Sakhalin, snow flurries following in their wake.

As they tumbled onto the cold coast, snow whirling around them, Jack stared at the Nightmare and thought hard. Over time, he had heard many legends relating to Nightmares, many different names from many different cultures.

'What about Mora?' he asked.

She stepped forward and pressed her sandy head against his shoulder, an affectionate sign for all that it shifted a deep-seated fear within him. Even during the day when she was weaker in the light, her proximity and her touch awakened fear and paranoia that rose and danced like ice crystals inside of him. But he was getting used to it now, and able to ride the fear out, knowing where it came from.

He lifted his hand, reached around and stroked her cheek. She was warm and velvety, and the tactile touches made her shiver with delight. More than that – Jack would never say as much – it woke a painful longing in him as well. He held on for a moment longer than she was comfortable, and then let go with an apologetic smile.

'Well, Mora, don't think we're gonna get back to the old shack tonight. What say we go see some Nivkh kids and make them some snow bears? I love snow bears!'

And with that he dashed off further into the island, Mora galloping behind, breath steaming in the frigid air. He was never worried about her giving the kids bad dreams, she only seemed concerned with him, and left everyone else alone. It was nice. It was like having a friend.

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And so, twenty two years passed from that evening he helped defeat Pitch and gained believers. He wasn't completely alone, but he was lonely. Mora stayed by his side, only disappearing when the other Guardians came to visit. Jack was particularly worried that Sandy would change her into a Good Dream, and he didn't know how to begin explaining that he wanted the memories of his

sister, wanted the vividness of her expressions and habits. It was an understanding he shared with Mora, that sometimes even painful memories could hold a sweetness if you knew where to look, that even nightmares did not always have to be completely without heart. So she went away when she sensed them, or he sent her away. Not that it happened often, the Guardians were so busy and content that they had visited him less and less as time went by.

Twenty two years and one evening under the light of the Man in the Moon, he felt an old, familiar, bell-like chime in his heart. He looked up immediately, his pulse racing, a cold zing of remembrance moving through him. And with it, *love*. He could not look up at the Man in the Moon and not feel a strange, alien love like a reaching starburst of light inside of him.

It's time, the Man in the Moon said inside of his heart. And a moment later, a picture of Jamie's face – an adult now, with two children – played strongly in his mind's eye, almost as though he were looking at a projected slide.

'It's time for what?' Jack said, and waited. He heard nothing in response.

'You know, sometimes you're not very helpful!'

He shook his staff up at the moon in frustration and then spun on one foot, trying to think of what it meant.

'It's time for what? Are you saying he's in trouble? Does he need me?' He glared up at the moon. 'Nothing to say?'

Mora walked up to him slowly, tilted her head and looked at the moon herself.

'You gotta work on your communication skills, buddy,' Jack said, angry, and looked up at the moon a moment longer, before turning back to Mora. 'I'm going to see Jamie, you coming?'

Mora was up in the air before he'd even finished the sentence. Offering her a grim smile, he set off on the fastest winds he could find, high up where tiny ice crystals were forming to make cirrus and the air was so thin only he and other beings like him could survive. He raced forwards, the wind tearing at his hair and fraying at his hoodie. He didn't know what to expect, what he would find. The words, *It's time*, reverberated through him like a mantra with no clear meaning. He was terrified, and he only wished he knew why.

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It was morning by the time they reached Jamie's hometown, and Jack, choosing to remain invisible this time, hunkered down outside the two storey Bennett residence, waiting.

A moment later, Jamie exited, looking haggard and worn. But he still had a weary smile for his young children; seven and nine year old girls; one serious, one mischievous, both sweet. And he had a tender glance for his partner, Wesley, who leaned out of the house and waved at him.

'Jamie, are you sure you should be going into work today? I'm worried about you.'

'It's just some kind of head cold, I don't know. It'll be fine!'

'I'm serious though. Just...consider it?'

'I'll tell you what, I'll drop the kids off to school and then book a doctor's appointment, how does that sound?' Jamie looked hopefully in Wesley's direction, and his partner nodded from the doorway, still looking concerned. Jack waited nearby. Was this why the Man in the Moon had

called to him? Jamie was sick? That didn't seem like something the Man in the Moon would concern himself with. What was going on?

Jamie turned and picked up his youngest daughter to give her a hug, and then halfway through straightening he wrenched in pain, dropped her and clapped his hands to his head. A moment later he turned and vomited cereal and bile to the ground.

'Gross, Daddy!' his youngest daughter cried. Wesley had his phone out of his pocket and was dialling even as he ran to Jamie's side.

Jamie didn't seem focused on any of them. He fell to his knees, and then to his side. Jack watched with horror when he keeled onto his back and his eyes rolled up into his head. His children were shrieking, trying to wake him up, and Wesley was getting an ambulance, describing the symptoms, saying things like, 'no, I don't think he's got any risk of aneurysm in his family, what are you saying? Yeah, yeah, sure I'll check his airway. Just hurry, okay?'

It was chaos. Jack hung back, uncertain, while Mora pranced agitated and excited all at the same time, feeding on the fear but aware of Jack's distress all the same. Jack felt helpless as Wesley did everything the person on the phone was telling him to do and Jamie still wouldn't wake up. He felt helpless when the ambulance pulled up and checked Jamie's vitals and a neighbour rushed over to say that she could take the kids while Wesley went with his husband to the hospital.

Then, as he began to fly behind the ambulance, fear pulsing in his throat, eyes blurry with terror, he felt something jerk hard inside of him.

He tumbled to a halt, staring blankly at the ambulance. The tug happened again, somewhere behind his heart and belly, and he dropped his staff and clutched at it with his hands. It *hurt*.

Then, seconds later, Jamie's hearth-fire of faith and love burning inside of him, burning for twenty two years, snuffed out. Jack collapsed onto the road, breath forced out of him. He felt lost. He hadn't known how dependent he'd become on Jamie's belief in him, and he stared blankly through tear-blurred eyes where the ambulance had been – still rushing to the hospital with a dead body lying inside of it – and could barely think.

Time passed, and Jack became aware of Mora nudging at his shoulder. She picked up his staff and dropped it on top of him. She pawed and stamped nearby, upset and charged with energy. He didn't know how much she understood of what had happened. But she wouldn't leave his side.

He rolled himself onto his hands and knees and tried to summon the will to drag himself upright, his head heavy. There was a hollow, flapping emptiness inside of him, making the sound that flags made during high winds.

Mora thrust her head under his arm and let him use her strength to pull him upright. He leaned heavily against her, fear exploding in like tiny bombs inside of him. It was a result, in part, of his close proximity to her. She was high-strung and her energy was fierce and strong after being exposed to so much fear.

'He's dead,' Jack said, hardly recognising the sound of his shredded voice. 'Just like that.'

He staggered off the road, staff gripped weakly in one hand, and sat down heavily on the ground again.

'I thought he had a lot more time. Thirty is...that's hardly no time at all. Right? That doesn't seem fair.'

Why, Jack thought, would the Man in the Moon bring him here for this? It was just cruel. He glared up at the sky, and the full moon was there, hanging low on the horizon, getting ready to set and allow the sun to reign.

He rose up on the winds, Mora following hesitantly, and stared at the satellite on the horizon that orbited the planet.

‘Why would you do this? Why would you bring me here to see *that*?’

He heard nothing.

‘Do you have some kind of plan?’ Jack’s heart leapt with a brutal hope. ‘Are you going to make him a Guardian?’

There was no response. Not even that pulse of love in his heart. It felt like a clear no, a letdown that went far beyond disappointment. It piqued Jack’s rage and had him racing through the sky towards the moon as though he could reach it and throttle the life out of the leader of the Guardians.

‘What use have you been to me, huh? Three hundred years alone and *nothing*! Nothing except some ice and some frost and some snow days! And what now? It’s time to make Jack live his life just like the good old days? Where no one knew who I was or believed in me? It’s time for the Man in the Moon to be all cryptic and useless again? I’m tired of playing these games with you! Tired of them!’ He was embarrassed to find himself crying again, glad – for once – that no one except Mora could see him in this moment. His voice wouldn’t stop breaking. His body shook.

He hardly noticed the blizzard that had spread behind him, the heavy anvils of cloud and the flurries of snow that had already begun. All he cared about was getting out of there, getting as far away as he possibly could. He travelled north towards the coldest regions of the world, trying to outrun what had happened, trying to outrun the hollow space in his heart that Jamie’s death had left behind.

Nightmares Have Feelings Too

That week, freak blizzards and snowstorms broke out all over the northern hemisphere like dropped bombs. The first few were accidents, clusters of ice-crystals in the sky clumping together to reflect Jack's mood. But as time passed and his anger grew in strength, he seeded them deliberately.

It wasn't the first time he'd reached his limit like this. Three hundred years of being mostly alone with the occasional run in with another spirit or Guardian would see him rise and fall on cycles of hope and hopelessness. Life could be snowballs or it could be snowstorms. It could be pretty patterns of frost, or it could be slicked down roads that caused the cars to skid and slide.

He just couldn't believe it, couldn't put it together. He didn't even know that the Man in the Moon could be aware that someone was about to die, let alone communicate it like that. What kind of being was he, that he could watch without intervening? That he would call Jack Frost to witness the death of a good man, a father with two daughters, a loving husband, a true believer? Maybe it was something like common courtesy. Jack wondered how he would have reacted to that horrible, gut-wrenching pain if he had been in his shack, or making snowballs or creating a snow day. But it didn't feel like common courtesy. His gratitude that the Man in the Moon had brought him into the fold of the Guardians was short-lived. The worst part was the love that he still felt in his heart when he looked up at the moon, it burned him, so he fled it and hid in clouds or daylight, under tree canopies or beneath the eaves of people's houses.

It was a Friday evening when he made it back to his three-walled shack. It looked sad and sorry, but it was his all the same. He flew up to settle in one of the boughs of the fir trees that crowded the wooden and snow-made walls. Even after all this time, he had never gotten quite comfortable with sleeping on a bed near the floor, about as far away from the refreshing wind as one could be. Mora came up and circled the tree uncertainly, and then rested silently on a thicker bough below. Jack watched her as she tilted her head and looked up at him, eyes glowing in the dark.

'I just want to know why, that's all,' he said. She didn't reply, black sand swirling around her. He often wondered about Mora, why she stayed with him, why she was so reluctant to join with Sandy's dreamsand again. He couldn't imagine her as anything other than she was now. Did they gain a sense of self after a while? Did they all have their own personalities? He'd asked her, but she, of course, could not reply.

He lay on his back and stared up at the constellations through the branches, the sparkling stars, and waited for sleep to steal over him.

Sleep wouldn't come. As he lay there, feeling more anxious, more impatient, sleep stayed back and would not cast its spell over him. He tossed, turned, huffed. One twist on the bough took him too far, and he slipped off and tumbled down, the staff falling behind him. He landed with a *flumph!* in a snow pile, his staff falling on top of his head, causing a sharp, shock of pain.

'I'm calling it,' he said to no one in particular, 'this has been a really bad week.'

He curled up in the snow pile, feeling the cold seep in all around him. His body temperature was frigid at the best of times, but he could still feel the cold, though he experienced it as pleasant rather than painful.

'Mora,' he called, and she floated down to him. 'Mora, come here.'

She thrust her head into the snow and her chin bumped against the top of his head. He twisted,

reached up with both hands and cupped her long head. Held it close. Immediately, adrenaline rushed through him, small bursts of fear detonated all over his body, and he breathed shakily through the worst of it. He wanted comfort, and in lieu of getting a warm embrace, he would take Mora's patient, steady presence. Her hot breath gusted over him, her sand-made body was at turns rough and then velvety depending which way he touched her. She couldn't give him nightmares while he was awake, but she could be there all the same. The fear was a small price to pay. It wasn't like she could help it, anymore than he could help accidentally freezing things when he wasn't paying attention.

But he still couldn't sleep, and after a while he got uncomfortable and had to let Mora go. She stared down at him calmly. He thought he was imagining things, but he thought she seemed worried about him.

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In the morning, there was a quick scrambling of hooves, a distressed whinny, and suddenly Mora disappeared, sailing off into the deeper shadows of the already dark forest. Jack got up hurriedly from the pile of snow just in time to see North's sleigh boom out of a portal and come rumbling to a flashy, loud halt. The reindeer pawed the ground and snorted, wild and boisterous, even now ready to begin flying again.

North got out of the sleigh. It looked surprisingly bare with no sacks of toys and only one occupant. Though, Jack realised, it still looked *awesome*. Maybe he'd borrow it one day.

'Jack! I have come every day for three days now, and finally you are here! Wonderful!' North drew Jack into a huge hug. Jack held his breath through it, unable to relax, wondering what North was doing there at all. North was the least likely to visit out of all of the Guardians. Sandy visited most often, then Toothiana, then – surprisingly – Bunnymund.

'Good to see you too, old man,' Jack said, pulling a half-smile from somewhere out of his depths. He just felt tired. He wanted to sink into North's hug and stay there for days, but he was a Guardian, and he couldn't ask for something like that. North wouldn't understand.

'What a cold snap, lately, yes? I have heard reports all over of blizzards! And my main suspect is you! With all the time you spend on the naughty list, is not surprising, yes? So, tell me,' North said, twirling part of his prodigious white beard around his finger. 'Are you going to be back on the naughty list this year?'

'It was just a few blizzards, nothing too serious, right?' Jack said, flippant. North chuckled and then shook his head.

'Hey,' Jack said suddenly, 'has the Man in the Moon said anything to you lately?'

'No. Should he have? He's spoken to you?'

'Uh, yeah, actually,' Jack rubbed a hand over his face and then trailed it through the air impatiently, creating a wave of frost particles in its wake. 'Yeah, about a week ago he just said 'it's time.' But he wouldn't elaborate. He didn't...do that for you?'

'It's time for what?' North said.

'Ha, well, he *also* showed me a picture of Jamie Bennett. And so I went to check him out and...well...you know.'

North looked at him in confusion, and then shook his head and frowned.

'Jack, are you telling me you caused all this destruction because of the Man in the Moon, a simple message? That's not like you.'

Jack stared at him hard, and decided he didn't feel like being reprimanded.

'Jamie died,' Jack said, incredulous. 'What did you expect me to do? Snowball fight? The world's greatest? I'm not fun *all* the time, North.'

'Jamie, Jamie...' North said, squinting his eyes and looking at his sleigh to borrow time. 'Ah! Jamie! Ah, Jack. I am sorry. You were quite close to him, were you not?'

'Quite close to him,' Jack muttered under his breath. 'You didn't even remember him. Is it so easy to take the belief of children for granted when there's *so many* of them? How can you forget Jamie? He was only the one who was a crucial part of keeping us powerful enough to defeat Pitch, remember?'

'Jack, it's been almost thirty years,' North said, spreading his arms apologetically, 'in that time, new children are born and grow and believe. Old children become adults and their belief in us, it is not the same. We focus on young children. It is their pure hearts, their *wonder* that keeps us powerful and strong. We cannot focus on every child that becomes an adult and dies.'

Jack swung sideways so that North couldn't see his betrayed expression. His knuckles were white on his staff. It wasn't that North was insensitive, he wasn't, the man was practically exuding sympathy. Jack felt that old, hungry loneliness again. Was it abnormal for him to remain so attached to a child who grew into an adult? Was that why the Man in the Moon had drawn attention to Jamie's passing? To remind Jack that he should be focusing on children? It still didn't make any sense. He wasn't like any of the other Guardians. He had died, for a start, as a human. And Jamie had been his biggest source of internal fire, and now it was gone and none of the children that believed in him – few on the ground though they were – compared.

'Jack, we were wrong to forget Jamie,' North said, sighing explosively. 'Without him, the world would be ruled by that *monster*. I say we hold a wake, back at workshop. I could invite the others, yes? It might be good for us,' North said, though it was clear that he mainly thought it would be a good idea for Jack. To help him *forget*, and focus on new children, just like everyone else. Jack traced a brief line in the snow with his staff.

'What would you do? What would you do if your sense of wonder went away?'

'I'm not understanding. It is who I am, how can it go away?'

'What if,' Jack said, looking down at the snow instead of up at the giant bear of a man in front of him. 'What if so few people believed in you, for so long, that who you were, the essence of who you were, could just...disappear? Maybe not forever, and maybe not completely. But what if it did? What would you do?'

North's worry for Jack seemed to metamorphose then into a strange, uncomfortable wariness. He folded his great arms, his brow furrowed. He looked down at Jack as though he hadn't seen him before.

'I am thinking you'll come back to the Workshop with me for a few days. The elves, they are not so good with quality assurance. Maybe you can come test the new toys? Yes? And the yeti, they are getting quite okay with you being in the Workshop now.'

Sure they are, Jack thought.

A part of him wanted badly to say yes. He knew what North was offering; a few days in the company of someone else, so they could keep an eye on him. North was concerned, and it felt nice, but it also felt alien, like it couldn't be trusted. How caring could someone really be if they thought it was their job to forget the children who became adults? It wasn't that Jack truly doubted North, it was that he didn't know if he could handle spending several days with someone who just didn't get it.

'You didn't answer my question,' Jack said, finally. 'What would you do?'

'Jack,' North said helplessly, 'I do not know. I cannot *imagine* losing my wonder. It is the very heart of who I am.'

Jack sighed, twirled the staff in his fingers.

'I know you're just trying to help, and I appreciate it. I'll, I'll back off on the blizzards, okay? I'm sure it'll be snowballs and snow days in no time. I'm a fun guy, remember?'

North laughed, relieved.

'Excellent, excellent. You come round the Workshop sometime this week too, and we'll have some treats and brainstorm some toys. Yes? I think you and I could do some spectacular things with snow globes.' North turned and made his way back to the sleigh, reaching out and patting some of his fey, wild reindeer as he passed them. As he settled into the driver's seat, he leaned out and looked at Jack, as though it may have just occurred to him that Jack may have been giving him false comfort.

'You and me on snow globes sounds like a great idea!' Jack said as a quick stall, and North chuckled, started his sleigh again, and then a moment later disappeared through one of his portals.

He wanted to be more upset at North for not remembering Jamie, but of course North was right, all of the Guardians – except for him, apparently – focused on children and lost track of them once they became adults. And, in the meantime, he knew that North was incredibly busy. Jack was sure that at least a third of his time was taken up with trying to clean up the catastrophes that the Elves caused.

He was tired of conversations that made him feel like he didn't belong.

Mora, a few minutes later, crept cautiously out of the shadows and back into the clearing. Her neck stretched this way and that as she tried to make sure that North was gone.

'Wow, you really don't want them to know about you, do you? Don't want to be a good dream?'

Mora shook her head violently.

'I won't rat you out, girl.'

She floated over to his side, and they stood quietly, both lost within their own thoughts.

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Jack expected that he would start to feel better, more capricious, after only a couple of weeks, but instead he found himself on some intense, downward spiral. He felt bitter and pursued by dark thoughts. He had always had a great capacity for dark thoughts. Winter was a wonderful season, it could be fun, but he knew that winter could kill too. He knew that better than anyone. Alongside these thoughts was the constant, background knowledge – like some kind of static that never

ceased – that he was so cold, in part, because he was a dead body reanimated. Animated by the magic of winter, certainly, but dead all the same.

In the presence of darkness, light-hearted quips turned into sarcastic observations. And a few too many barbs one day had Mora head-butting him, disturbed and nickering with worry.

‘I thought you’d be enjoying this,’ he said, taunting her. But even as he said it, he frowned. It was unlike him to be mean, and she was clearly upset.

‘Okay, not enjoying this then, I’m sorry. I’m not normally...I mean I don’t even understand why I’m like this. I was *more* alone before he died and more carefree. So what’s happened? I don’t even know. I’m not much fun at the moment, I guess.’

Mora pranced around him and then head-butted him again, softly, accepting his apology. The bunt of her forehead against his hoodie still made him stagger backwards, and he pushed his staff out to support his weight, laughing at her antics. He skidded away on a low draft of wind and she followed, pushing him with her nose a few times, as though checking he was okay.

And then, later, on a Wednesday so cold that diamond dust had formed in the air, something terrible happened.

Jack slumped down to sleep, finally thinking that maybe he could just lose himself in the oblivion of resting. He had craved emptiness. And he would be lying if he didn’t also want to see his sister again, with her beautiful face and her exhilaration to be out on that day she had nearly died. It didn’t matter how much the nightmare hurt, he wanted some familiarity, a reminder that he had once loved and been loved.

But, instead, Mora brought something far different. He was back in Jamie’s hometown, helpless and paralysed with fear, and just as quickly he was following the ambulance down the road and then tumbling to the bitumen, broken under the weight of Jamie’s death. Terror bullied its way through him. In such a short, distilled time the dream shattered him, he woke up gasping for air and arching on the ground as though he could somehow force the feelings from him. He realised from the pain in his back, arm and head that he had fallen from the bough.

He rolled onto all fours, shuddered through the sensations of losing Jamie all over again. His fingers clenched into snow, ice packed underneath his short fingernails. He tried to get his breathing under control, tried to turn dry sobs into steady breaths, but his body resisted and he lowered his head to the cold snow.

In the space between fear and focus, anger came. He dragged himself to his feet slowly, unsteadily. He saw Mora hiding behind a tree already, quivering. Charged up with Jack’s own fear, uncomfortable herself.

He opened his mouth to start yelling, to lose it, but couldn’t find the words or the energy. She couldn’t help what she showed him, could she? It was the first time he’d slept since Jamie had died, and it made sense, in some horrible way, that she’d feed him those images, right?

But without the consolation of anger, of throwing his emotions at someone or something else instead, he felt only despair. He choked on it, sunk to the ground slowly, head bowed.

Mora approached him after a few minutes and then stood protectively nearby, as though she wouldn’t let anyone hurt him. Which was ridiculous, because she was a Nightmare, and doubly ridiculous, because he couldn’t imagine feeling any more hurt than he already did.

Her tail flicked in constant agitation. She was still stirred up on his energy. Whether he liked it or not, she did feel his fear, the weight of his emotions. He'd feel sorry, but she didn't seem to mind. Sometimes it was handy having a companion around who actually fed off fear, instead of getting intimidated by it.

*

After the nightmare, depression found him. Mora didn't like this at all and she protested Jack's empty, despondent mood. She pushed him out of trees, bumped him when they moved through the air together, even kicked snow at him a few times, as though inciting him into playing with the stuff himself.

But nothing worked.

She screeched at him in frustration and he looked up at her, and shrugged.

'Don't these things take time? And I've got plenty of that on my side, right? Immortal and all.'

His voice was flat, even for him.

She stalked forward and grabbed the hem of his hoodie in her black teeth and tugged *hard*.

He stumbled and then fell, shouting in protest, but she didn't let go, and simply dragged him a few feet backwards before he finally managed to struggle his way free.

'What the hell was that?' he said, struggling to his feet.

She stepped forward again, teeth bared, and he danced out of her way.

'Oh, no you don't. Teeth off the hoodie! No more dragging Jack Frost around because you're unhappy!'

But she came for him again, as stubborn as he was, eyes glowing mischievously. She snapped at his clothing, and he moved out of her way each time, calling upon more and more wind to get out of her way, until finally they were both circling each other up in the skies. She was galloping and charging, and he ducking and weaving, using his small, light stature to get the upper hand.

Time passed and he realised she was herding him, pushing him a certain direction. He held up his hands and she stopped, arching her head back, as though suggesting she was only giving him a break of a few seconds.

'You want me to follow you?'

She pushed hot air out of her nostrils and flung her head up and down.

'Where?'

She raced ahead, came back, raced ahead again, reaching out to snap at the side of his hoodie when he didn't follow.

'Hey!' he said, swinging out of the way on a breeze, managing his first genuine grin in a while. 'Hey! Okay! I get it, I'll follow you!'

She charged forwards on the winds, racing away from him, and he followed at a fast pace as they sailed higher and higher into the atmosphere, where turbulent winds sculpted clouds into fantastic shapes. Above fluffy cumulus peaks they went, the Nightmare leading and Jack following, feeling

the wind tugging at his hair.

They moved at speed through the air for hours, and Jack knew they were covering a lot of ground. He let himself be led, happy for someone else to take charge. Curiosity grew within him, until – when she finally sank gracefully beneath a new patch of stratocumulus – he followed with some excitement.

But when he saw where she had lead him, his heart beat a quick drumbeat of fear in his chest.

She had led him straight to the entrance to Pitch's lair.

Jack took a double-take, an *entrance*? But hadn't that been closed in completely the last time he'd seen Pitch? Wasn't that the *point*? That he'd get sealed up underground and not bother anyone anymore?

But no, where there had once been a simple hole underneath an abandoned bed, there were huge blast marks. The residual entrance was huge, and Jack could see rocks and dirt flung all over the place, as though a massive detonation had re-opened the entrance. Jack almost didn't want to know how much power Pitch could have amassed to cause so much damage.

Mora didn't even wait for him, she floated forwards easily and only paused when he shouted her name.

'Pitch has escaped?' he said, breathless. She watched him without responding, her tail twitched impatiently.

'I should get the others,' he said. Though, he was curious, he had never been one to explore in a group, he liked finding things out for himself. Mora kept watching him, her expression unfathomable. After all this time with Mora, he trusted her, despite her past affiliation with the Nightmare King. And after all this time contemplating his encounters with Pitch, he felt more pity than terror, more understanding than ignorance.

She turned after a few beats and simply sailed down into the blackness, leaving Jack behind.

'Shit, wait! Shit, okay, I'm coming!'

He followed on a smaller breeze. Mora had left him far behind. He couldn't see any sign of her as he sunk further into the earth.

He moved slowly, feeling the darkness all around him. It was inky black and oppressive, but Jack noticed something was missing. The dark didn't feel *alive*, as it had last time. He frowned as he continued down. Something important was missing. It didn't feel right.

He reached the bottom after some time, and a dim, eerie light lit the tunnel in front of him. He followed it, floating on one of the cooperative, humid cave-breezes to not make any noise. Even here, the shadows felt like they were regular shadows, not like extensions of Pitch's Fearlings or Nightmare Men. They were shadows, not *living* shadows. The tunnel itself was still frightening simply for being so deep underground and out of Jack's comfort zone, but it didn't hold a candle to the last time he had visited Pitch's lair.

'Mora?' he whispered. 'Where are you?'

He followed the tunnel down its twists and turns until it opened into that gigantic, dimly lit, huge cavern. The rusted cages were still there, hung from heights so high that he couldn't see the top of the cave itself, only chains disappearing into the darkness. His skin prickled with goose-bumps. He

took a deep breath, looked around curiously.

It was then he noticed some of the disarray. There, to the left, cages lay shattered on the ground. And around the place, he saw overturned furniture. He continued on through the cavern, seeing no sign of the living shadows or Pitch. A creeping horror stretched through him. *Pitch had escaped.*

‘*Mora!*’ he hissed, impatient. ‘I have to tell the others!’

He moved from the centre to the darker edges of the cavern, places where light hardly reached. He looked all around for her, but couldn’t see her. He ignored the offshoots of other tunnels, not daring to get lost in this warren of underground darkness if he could help it.

He turned a corner and stared into inky blackness uncertainly.

And from within that inky blackness, eyelids opened, revealing two glowing, golden eyes.

Jack stumbled backwards, thrust his staff out threateningly. Blue lightning crackled on the edges of his staff from fear alone.

Pitch’s chuckle may have sounded tired, but it was also amused, confident. He stepped out of the shadows and the dim light of the cave illuminated him.

Jack realised something was wrong.

‘What happened to you?’ he gasped.

Pitch looked diminished somehow. Still as tall as ever, but somehow shrunken without the cloying mess of shadows at his back, oozing from his black robes. There was no roiling mass of Fearlings, no amassed troops of Nightmares, and even the shadows that Pitch emerged from remained as shadows, and didn’t cling or reach out as though desperate for their Nightmare King.

‘Jack Frost,’ Pitch said, silkily, still capable of infusing just the right amount of charm into his tone to be frightening. ‘It’s not enough that you defeat my reign of terror, but now you have come to harass me too?’

Pitch paused and tilted his head sideways, as though listening to a radio station that only he could hear. He made some kind of pleased sound in the back of his throat. His mouth curled into a sinister smile, and he reached out his hand to the darkness, only for Mora to step forward and push her muzzle affectionately into the palm of his hand.

‘Mora?’ Jack asked, confused.

‘So,’ Pitch said, reaching up to stroke Mora’s head with more affection than Jack would have thought him capable of. Mora leaned into the touch and watched Jack solemnly. ‘So tell me, how does it feel now that the Guardian has lost his guardian?’

Jack was lost for words, his mouth went dry, he stared at Mora as though seeing her for the first time. His heart hurt. He swallowed around a sudden wash of acid in the back of his throat.

‘Don’t *worry*, Jack. That’s unlike you, isn’t it? Worry? Or so *they’d* like to think. But she hasn’t betrayed you, this one is surprisingly loyal.’ Pitch turned to look at her as though surprised, curling his fingers around her cheek. He turned back to Jack with a knowing smile. ‘But a Nightmare cannot help but share the fears of others with me.’

Jack took a few more steps backwards, and then looked for the tunnel he’d emerged from,

wondering how far away it was. Now that he was here, the memories of Pitch's capacity for cruelty seemed fresh and not that far away. Their lonely encounter in Antarctica reverberated through him. It occurred to him that the last person he wanted to know about Jamie dying was Pitch. He who so revelled in the Guardians losing their believers last time.

'Now, what's the point in coming all this way if you're not – at the very least – going to stay for a little chat?'

He turned to face Pitch, riding out the minute shivers of fear just as he had learned to do with Mora. He grit his teeth, got a solid grip on his staff and nodded.

'Okay, a *chat*. And you can tell me what the hell happened to you.'

Pitch turned, satisfied, and walked down one of the tunnels.

Jack realised he had few choices but to follow, reluctant to leave Mora alone. Besides, he wanted answers. Something was very wrong.

Get Out!

Chapter Notes

This chapter kicked my *ass.* So apologies for the delay, I've stared at it for so long it defies belief. Back to weekly updates hopefully! (And thank you so for all the comments / kudos so far! You all rock!)

The tunnel was long and convoluted, but Jack was certain he could remember his way back. It was stifling, being so far underground, close to the hot heartbeat of the earth itself. Pitch himself made hardly a sound. Mora, too, was almost completely silent, except for the occasional susurrant of the black sand in her mane and tail.

Jack wanted to call her back to him, wanted to leave. And yet...

And yet he was curious too.

'There's a really big entrance into this place. Did you do it?' Jack asked, sounding a great deal more laidback than he felt. He still felt low, flatter than usual. Mora may have dragged him out to race along the winds, but the dark, deep mood that had prompted her to do so hadn't left yet. It still waited, a wound inside of him.

Pitch didn't reply.

'I mean, you can get out!' Jack said, waving his staff for emphasis even though Pitch couldn't see him, and didn't look back. Down here, it was so gloomy that he didn't see the frost he created, so much as the random glints it made as its facets hit the minimal light.

'Can I?' Pitch said then, 'I hadn't noticed.'

'Well, whatever you're sending your shadows out there to do, we're going to stop you again!'

It wasn't bravado, either. Jack felt like he reacted to Pitch in a myriad of different ways. On one level, the crowing triumph of knowing that he beat the *Nightmare King* last time and he could do it again. On another level, the doubt and uncertainty, because Pitch had become so strong, unhinged many of the Guardians, even Sandy, who was more powerful than all of them. And then on another level, different forms of fear, roiling and shifting and merging, awareness that this was a being who understood a great deal more about terror than he did. Pitch was someone who seemed to be able to do things with fear that many other beings couldn't.

'I daresay you shall,' Pitch said, as though he didn't much care either way. Jack narrowed his eyes, almost missed an outcropping of rock and swung around it at the last minute.

'You'll never win,' Jack said, becoming frustrated that they were moving down deeper into the earth, that Mora was walking alongside Pitch and not him. Frustrated that he couldn't get a rise out of Pitch. 'No one believes in you!'

'Oh?' Pitch said, and Jack could hear the sly smile in his tone. 'Projecting are we?'

'The last time I saw you, you were literally being taken down by your fears,' Jack said, and

smirked a little, because Pitch was still the enemy, because he'd joked about it at the time, all those years ago, but Pitch hadn't been there to hear him. The man before him didn't miss a beat in his walking, didn't even pause. But then, a moment later, he replied with:

'Last I saw you, Jamie was still alive.'

Those eight words were like a punch in the gut. It was the first time since seeing North, that Jack had heard anyone reference the death. That it was Pitch in his lair added to the sensation of having the floor fall out from under him. Jack stumbled over the uneven, rocky tunnel surface and moved his staff out for balance. His mouth went dry with frost crystals and he breathed out an exhale of frigid mist.

At that, Pitch paused, though he still did not turn around.

'For future reference, I would recommend *not* playing that game with me.'

Jack's eyes narrowed mutinously. A few comebacks flitted through his head, one after the other, but he squashed them all down. Pitch might not have his army of shadows behind him as reinforcements – where were they, anyway? – but was still capable of inflicting damage, and until Jack knew how much, perhaps it would be best to stay circumspect. Not that Jack was any good at circumspect.

Pitch disappeared down a side corridor and Jack followed, and then stopped, because it was *complete* darkness down here.

'Not afraid of a little darkness, are we?'

'A *little*?' Jack joked, and then startled when he felt Mora's head butting into him gently, persistently. He put his hand on her and immediately started trying to quiet his breathing, the fear thrumming through him. It was so automatic in her presence that he didn't even think about it. He was grateful that she was there, tactile and warm, like volcanic sands still being heated from beneath. It was nothing like waking up in a frozen lake, anyway.

He blinked, dazed, when a wooden door set into stone opened and warm, golden light spilled forth. Pitch walked calmly inside, and Jack stepped through, looking at Mora questioningly as he did so.

It was a *room*. A wide cavern that was filled – impossibly – with furniture and affects. There was a sturdy, rustic table and chairs that looked ancient and was scarred with black burn marks. The floors had been smoothed down so that they almost resembled solid, dark slate. Large, forbidding, wooden cabinets had been pushed up against almost all of the circular walls, and Jack dreaded to think what lurked inside them all. The room stretched out, an oval, and towards the back, far from the light, was the outline of a bed, a comfortable chair, wooden chests.

Jack stopped and his mouth dropped open. In all the time he'd known of Pitch, he had never considered that he would have something like a home. That he would have furniture and a space that seemed...oppressive, but still filled with small creature comforts. Even the candles that offered their light had been made with care. It made him even more suspicious. Was this a trick? Why would Pitch invite him somewhere like this?

'What kind of game are you playing at here?' Jack said, knowing that Pitch had taken advantage of his naivete in the past.

Pitch walked into a section that was all shadow, disappeared completely into the blackness. A moment later, Jack couldn't swallow a yelp in time when he felt a bony finger poke into his

shoulder blade from behind.

‘Holy shit!’ Jack cursed, turning and holding out his staff defensively. Despite Pitch’s obvious weakness, the disappearance of his living shadows, Pitch could still teleport through shadow. He backed away from Pitch warily, stayed where there was light. He could still feel the press of a sharp fingertip into his bone and it rattled him. Pitch stepped into the light himself, a smug, self-satisfied expression on his face, eyes gleaming.

‘This is a trap!’ Jack shouted, angry that he had been brought here by Mora, angry at himself for following Pitch into what was obviously some kind of deception. Beneath all of that were older angers; at Pitch for having betrayed him all those years ago, at the Man in the Moon for his vague message and Jamie’s death. Jack felt the frustration build cold and relentless inside of him.

The bolt of ice and frost that he sent through his staff was a powerful one. Pitch’s eyes widened, his body jerked like he was about to lunge out of the way, and then he flew backwards into the wall. Jack winced at the sound of him hitting stone. Pitch fell to the ground. Jack kept his staff up and frowned when Pitch didn’t immediately rally. He had hit the stone *hard*.

‘You *are* weaker!’

Mora stamped her hooves in agitation as Pitch slowly drew himself upright, his expressions shifting from surprise, to outrage, to an indifference that Jack didn’t believe at all. Pitch was still closest to the exit and Jack felt fear. He expected revenge, retaliation. He steadied his stance and waited for what Pitch would do.

The Nightmare King simply watched Jack. Watched him with cold, dead eyes. Jack resisted the urge to fidget or shift under that gaze. Resisted the urge to look away and then almost wanted to laugh when he realised, *is this some kind of staring contest?* But eventually that went away too. Chasing it was the absurd feeling that he should apologise for attacking Pitch without warning like that, even if he had good reason to do it, it still felt wrong to send anyone flying full force into a stone wall. And then, on the heels of that, came *fear*.

It started at a manageable level. A level that he associated with Mora in close proximity. But it built inexorably. He wanted to look away. He tried to shift his gaze sideways and exhaled sharp and shallow when he realised he couldn’t.

It surpassed the fear that Mora could inspire quickly, and Jack swallowed. His hand clenched spasmodically on his staff. Pitch’s lips quirked at this. Jack felt as though he was tumbling down a steep, endless spiral. All the things that he had been feeling before he had seen Pitch piled up, one on top of the other; the loneliness, the loss of Jamie, seeing Jamie’s partner freaking out and wondering how he had reacted when Jamie had died in the ambulance, all of it.

Pitch looked away casually, like he hadn’t done anything at all, and it broke the accumulating terror, the pounding darkness.

Jack took a weak step back, clinging to his staff, aware that Pitch and Mora could hear his breathing and hardly able to care. He struggled to master it, but couldn’t.

He hadn’t known Pitch could do *that*.

‘Delicious,’ Pitch said, and Jack was still trying to scramble his mind together again, it took him a few beats to realise that Pitch meant his fear. ‘No wonder Mora has jumped ship.’

‘I can still hurt you,’ Jack gasped, waving his staff around in what he hoped was a threatening

manner.

‘I may be weaker, but I can still best *you*, frost spirit.’ Pitch said, flippant.

‘You sent them out, didn’t you?’ Jack managed. ‘All your shadows? To make it look like you’re innocent, and it’s a *lie*. Nobody’s going to believe this whole act, Pitch. What do you have planned?’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry to inform you, but I’m not actually in a habit of sharing information with trouble-making sprites who trespass upon my property and then force an unprovoked attack upon me. I think you’ll find that’s common manners, actually. Or had you forgotten, seeing as though you haven’t had anything to do with almost anyone for so long?’

‘Ha ha. Jack’s alone. I get it. You should take that show on the road.’

Pitch smiled as he looked down at some of the burn marks on his table. But it was a strange, self-deprecating smile. Jack felt like he had intruded on some kind of private moment, like there was a whole, huge picture he was missing. Mora stood nearby, mane and tail stiff, but mostly unmoving. Jack thought about what Pitch had said about Mora jumping ship, and opened his mouth to ask about it, when he saw something that caught his eye.

A glint of embroidery. *Gold* embroidery. It lurked at the very bottom of Pitch’s robe. Just a small patch, as though shadows had been rubbed away and revealed something underneath. It was intricate and artistic, beautiful even. Jack stared, confused. Weren’t the robes just black? Hadn’t they always been black?

‘Is that embroidery on your robes, or are you just happy to see me?’

Pitch’s expression froze, and then a moment later he shifted so that the embroidery twitched into shadow. Jack rolled his eyes. What the hell was that all about? It had looked like a lot of care had gone into it. Like nothing he’d ever seen before. And he’d been around the world a few times, he’d seen a lot of things.

‘You know, you’re sensitive about some really weird things. Anyone ever tell you that?’

Pitch drew himself to his full height. Jack could tell that he was angry, but not why. Surely not the embroidery? Why would that be a big deal? And Jack was still annoyed. Annoyed at being made a fool of. At not knowing what was going on.

‘I think you should leave.’

‘And let you continue whatever evil plan you’ve masterminded? Fat chance! I really doubt that the last thirty years have made you less desperate to get everyone to believe in you by hurting them. You’re even lonelier than I am.’

Pitch smiled cruelly, the few living shadows attached to him expanded and swelled, and Jack thought; *Oh shit*.

‘Projecting, are we?’ Pitch said again. ‘Coming down here, reeking of misery, of the fear of being *forgotten*. So myopic and self-focused that he is unable to see anything else but his own melodrama. I have asked you once, I will ask you again: Get out of my home.’

‘Seriously? Just like that? Whatever happened to having a little chat? We’ll stop you, you know.’

‘Are you so stupid?’ Pitch said then, furrows appearing in his forehead. He gestured to himself.

‘Look at me. Look at what I’ve been reduced to. You may believe what you want about any plans that I have, but you might also consider that there are things in this world that commanded evil, the dark, before I ever came to this godforsaken realm. And they-’ Pitch cut himself off mid-sentence, and Jack was surprised to see the flash of distress before it disappeared. If he didn’t feel so threatened, he’d want to ask about it, to find out more.

‘Come on, Mora,’ Jack said, taking some steps towards the exit and watching Pitch warily. Pitch still looked threatening, capable of damage. Jack felt it as shivery chills that upset even his own cold equilibrium.

Mora paused, and then walked hesitantly towards Jack.

‘Come on, Mora, that’s it. Let’s go.’

Pitch watched Mora approach Jack with a bland expression in his face. But when Mora walked to Jack with more certainty, he snapped. Jack jumped back as he surged forwards.

‘You would take her from me as well? One of my last, remaining Nightmares?’

Jack, wide-eyed, tried to think of something to say. Just as quickly, Pitch looked sideways and his expression evened out into that of someone who didn’t care. It felt strange to see Pitch like this. If he wasn’t so frightened of being taken advantage of, he’d feel more compelled to trust his instincts. Something bad had happened to Pitch. The idea that something may have done this, something worse, was too much to think about.

Jack silently called up one of the cave winds and left speedily, picking up more and more speed the further he got, convinced that at any moment Pitch would come leaping out of the dark to trap and imprison him.

But nothing followed him, and he emerged from the blasted entrance unfettered and free.

He took several deep breaths, floating above that dark, wretched space, under the cover of a sky so bright it burned his eyes. His gaze fell on Mora, her dark, velvet sands soothing to stare at.

And the a moment later he scowled at her.

‘Some help you were! What was that anyway? Taking me to *him*?’

Mora didn’t say anything, couldn’t, simply watched him with her red-orange eyes. He couldn’t even read her body language.

‘I have to tell the others,’ he said to himself. ‘I suppose you’ve gotta do your own thing for a while anyway, I’m going to the Workshop to see North. I know you don’t want them to see you. Are you...’ Jack paused. ‘Are you going to be okay?’

Mora floated forwards, nuzzled Jack briefly, and then looked at him sidelong. He smiled at her and she galloped away on her own winds without a backwards glance. It looked like she was travelling back in the direction of Jack’s home, which was a relief. He remembered Pitch telling him that Mora had ‘jumped ship.’ Why would she do that? What was it about Jack that drew her to him? Too many disturbing questions, he had almost no motivation to look at them.

Pitch had already taken him on a terrible roller-coaster ride to his inner darkness and he didn’t want to return voluntarily.

‘Come on!’ he shouted to the wind, trying for a level of enthusiasm that he didn’t truly feel. ‘Let’s

go to North's Workshop!'

*

It was instinct to seek out one of the entrances to the Workshop that was manned by Phil the yeti. Normally it gave him a thrill to bother the creature, so it was habit to find him and then walk up, head held high, despite the tiredness that moved through him. Long months, long weeks, a long day. Even Guardians got tired when they pushed themselves too hard. All spirits did.

'Hi, Phil. Is North in?'

Phil grumbled and glared at Jack as he reluctantly lowered his pike and let him through. A great, painted door, large enough for giants to step through, swung open without creaking. Inside, a whirlwind of colour as the elves and yetis worked tirelessly on new toy ideas, old toys, the Workshop itself. The whole place whizzed with sound and glittered and gleamed with colours; bold reds, enthusiastic yellows, solid blues.

Jack paused to watch some elves accidentally set their hats on fire and then delight in smacking each other until the flames went out. By the end of it, they were smacking each other's faces and giggling. He continued on his way. He'd learned that North spent a great deal of his time making fantastic inventions out of food or ice or wood in his own studios, and another great portion of time down in the stables, rough-housing with the fierce reindeer who loved to gallop along the winds almost as much as Mora did.

He found North working on gingerbread skyscrapers. They were huge, spectacular works of art, covered in confectionary and icing, depicting real skyscrapers from around the world. He stared at a gingerbread Eiffel Tower just as North turned around and noticed him.

'Eye spy with my little eye, something beginning with Jack!' North said, looking happy and concerned all at the same time.

He came over and pulled Jack into a one-armed hug (his other arm held ten brushes and a palette of sugar paint), and Jack felt the shock of rawness that he always felt whenever another one of the Guardians touched him. Just when he thought that he would like nothing more than to lean hard into North and forget about everything that had happened, North spun away and painted some highlights on a gingerbread roof and Jack was left feeling unmoored.

'So, what brings you here to my Kingdom? Wanting to stay here for a little while? Help the yeti and the elves? Create ice sculptures and snowglobes with me!' North turned in excitement and accidentally knocked his current masterpiece with his elbow. The skyscraper, easily five feet tall, fell sideways with alarming speed, shattering into pieces on the floor. North turned and looked at it, and then shrugged.

'Oh well. I make more.'

'North,' Jack said, 'I...'

Now, how to explain what had happened without betraying the existence of Mora? Without her having dragged Jack to Pitch's lair, why would Jack have gone there on his own? He scrambled some quick-thinking together.

'I was on my regular rounds, you know, creating fun and mayhem...'

Man, Jack thought, could I sound any less enthusiastic?

‘...And I happened by Pitch’s old home. You know, where he was conquered. And-’

North turned suddenly, face serious.

‘What has happened?’ North said.

Jack looked at all the skyscrapers, many of them far taller than he was, all shining with sugar glaze windowpanes and piped sugar brickwork. All decorated with candy and some even with planter boxes and little flowers carved out of candied fruit.

‘You know me, I got curious. I mean, there was a new entrance, and I wanted to-’

‘Alone? Jack, you know better,’ North reproved, shaking his head disapprovingly. ‘And?’

‘I think Pitch can get free again. But I think there’s something wrong. With Pitch. I just thought you should know. It doesn’t seem...right.’ Jack stumbled over the wording. Already, he didn’t know if he was making too big a deal out of nothing, or too small a deal out of something potentially catastrophic.

North put down the paintbrushes and the sugar glaze palette, and an elf immediately appeared, grabbed the sugar paints and slunk away to lick at them under the shadow of a Christmas tree, uncaring that he was painting his face a mess of colours in the process.

The great Guardian walked to the entrance of his studio and looked around searchingly.

‘Ah, yes, you. Rob, come.’

A yeti stepped forward, he looked like a warrior yeti. He wore armour and had a shield hanging at his waist. North clapped him on the shoulder.

‘Bring me my sabres. Quickly!’

Rob hastened off, and North gestured for Jack to follow him as he started walking quickly out of his studio.

‘We will go investigate this strangeness. The reindeers could do with a ride. The Globe has been quiet, so hopefully we have caught this early, yes?’

When Rob the yeti came back, North took his belt hung with two sabres in scabbards and waved Rob off without a backwards glance while strapping it around his middle. The sabres were huge, threatening weapons and when North caught Jack staring at them, he laughed.

‘They grew with me! They weren’t always this big!’

The sleigh was readied, the reindeer always ready to go, and Jack climbed in feeling an old thrill of happiness, a bit of spark. North’s sabres clinked musically against the inside of the sleigh. And then they were off. The reindeer charged wildly forwards, and North had one hand on the reins and his other was searching inside around a canvas sack for the right snowglobe. After a few seconds of fumbling he had it.

The snowglobe was thrown high into the air, and the reindeer bucked up to chase it, hungry for the portal’s rush. The world opened and swallowed them in but a moment, and with a sickening swoop they moved through star-split darkness to emerge on the other side of the portal, coming to a halt near the entrance to Pitch’s labyrinthine lair.

North got out first, settling the reindeer with a gentle sweep of his hand. He had one palm on the hilt of his sabre, and the other rested by his side. Jack followed, his grip tight on his staff. So little time had passed since he had left. It had only taken a few hours to reach North's Workshop.

The scorch marks and debris from the blasted entrance were drawn to Jack's attention yet again as North walked along the outside of it, looking at it closely.

'This does not look like Pitch's work,' North said. 'But! Pitch is wily.'

'Tell me something I don't know,' Jack said on a half-smile.

After North's inspection of the entrance was satisfied, they both jumped down into the dark. North cushioned on something that Jack couldn't decipher, while he allowed winds to catch and slow his fall. When they reached the bottom, Jack was struck again by the lack of living shadow. The heat this far down was cloying. He sent a ball of spinning frost down into the shadows and watched it melt into droplets not more than three metres away from him.

North walked cautiously through the tunnel, his steps loud. It seemed like he wanted to announce his presence. Jack favoured the silence that floating along the cave winds could bring. The cave winds themselves weren't like the crisp, winter winds. They were heavy and thick with a myriad of gases, temperamental, influenced by the earth's paroxysms of uneven breath as volcanic movements altered and shifted.

Pitch was waiting for them as they entered the main cavern. He sat on a low, smooth rock, arms folded, looking benign. He didn't even spare a glance to Jack, ignoring him as he had done the first time they'd officially met. It shouldn't have chafed against him, it shouldn't have mattered, but it did.

North withdrew his sabres. They sung through their scabbards. Pitch blinked calmly, looking down at the sabres themselves before looking up at North.

'Here to kill an unarmed man?' Pitch said, raising a single brow.

'You are not a man,' North replied, stepping towards Pitch with purpose.

'How forgetful of me. Here to kill an unarmed, forgotten being?'

North paused. Minutes ticked by and Jack realised that North was waiting for the trick, the trap, the ambush; but nothing came. Pitch didn't move, shadows didn't sprawl out from the darkness. The whole cavern itself just felt...dead. Jack looked around in confusion. North kept his sabres up and ready and looked around himself.

'Something is not right,' he said, shaking his head, bewildered. He turned to Jack. 'You don't feel it? His power is gone.'

'*He* is right here,' Pitch said, though there was no insult in his tone.

'The Globe is silent. If you had sent all that evil away for a plan, *I* would know.' North waved a sabre for emphasis, and then sheathed it, leaving himself armed with only one sword.

'Where did it go?' North said, eyes narrowing. 'You will tell us.'

'Yes. The boy with the wooden stick and the bringer of wonder to children are sure to make me. I'm honestly just so terrified I've come full circle back to boredom.'

Jack exhaled a breath of laughter before he could stop himself, and both Pitch and North turned to him in surprise. He quickly covered it by coughing and then attempted to look innocent, widening his eyes and shrugging, as though he couldn't understand why they were both looking at him. North turned his gaze back to Pitch quickly. Pitch's gaze lingered a moment on Jack, considering. Then he too faced North again.

'You must stay here until we have figured this out,' North said, grim and short on patience.

'I'll have to check my social calendar. Can I get back to you?' Pitch said, wry. He stood smoothly and North had his second sabre unsheathed again immediately. Pitch bared his teeth on a wicked smile.

'It's lovely that I can still keep you on your toes.' He tilted his head to the side. 'It's occurred to you already, hasn't it? This one,' he gestured to Jack, 'was so remarkably slow on the uptake. I guess they're just hiring Guardians too young these days. But you, *you* know what else lurks on this planet, don't you? The Man in the Moon may have a personal vendetta against *me*, but there is far more in this world than just my darkness. I can feel it already, you know. Your fear. Are you, even now, starting to mentally check off who would be capable? What they might be planning? What insurmountable odds your intrepid team of fighters will have to face next?'

North said nothing, only glowered at Pitch as though he wanted nothing more to run him through with his weapons, regardless of whether he was unarmed. Jack realised that along with that fear-causing eye contact trick that Pitch had done earlier, and his ability to teleport in the darkness, he was still able to read people's fears, or at least guess well. Maybe he was taking a wild stab in the dark, but he seemed far too confident to only be guessing. North looked too grim for it to be completely off the mark.

Jack wasn't used to being referred to as young. In appearance, maybe, but in terms of *age*? He thought about his solitary existence, the time he spent chasing the winds and never staying in many places for too long at a time. Was it possible that he had missed out on some of the evils in the world, particularly spirits, because they all left him alone too? After all, Jack was an insignificant player in the grand scheme of things, wasn't he? What had he missed? Small bubbles of fear began surfacing inside of him, and he swallowed.

Pitch turned to look at him, clearly aware that Jack had started to feel frightened. His eyes narrowed and it looked as though he was about to address him, and then he turned back to North.

'Do you ever dread, North, that one day even you may not be able to save the day? Is there any room for that amongst all that *wonder*?'

He turned and walked towards one of the exit tunnels without looking back.

'Pitch! This is not over! We will be returning!'

There was no response, and only a minute later Pitch was enveloped in shadow and could have teleported to any other part of his underground kingdom and neither of them would have known it. Jack turned to look at North, who was staring down at his sabres, lost in thought.

'North?' Jack queried, hesitant, and the Guardian looked up at him with a rueful grin.

'It is being nothing.'

They left together, but at the entrance it was clear that North was agitated.

'Come on, tell me. What's going on?'

'I just need to talk with some people and see what comes up. I can take you home?'

Jack thought of his three-walled 'home' that he was feeling less well-disposed to with time. He shook his head.

'I think there's some snow days in Arkhangelsk with my name on them!'

North waved with his whole body as Jack hopped up on the winds and shot away. He was feeling a lot of things. Excitement that something was finally happening, that maybe he'd get to spend some time with all the Guardians again and it would be like before. Guilt that he was excited about something that was probably bad news for everyone else. Curiosity, because if Pitch didn't have his shadows about him then what was he? Just a fear spirit? Still evil? Something else entirely? And beneath all of that he still felt lost and lonely, the two things he tried to ignore and not think about. Because how much fun was that? Not much fun at all.

He sent frost out in the shape of Mora once North was out of sight, and sent it far ahead of him. He raced to catch up, to leave his problems far behind.

Something Unseelie This Way Comes

Chapter Notes

:) Enjoy! (Again, thanks for all the comments and the kudos and everything! Didn't expect this kind of response, and it's been super motivational, so cheers!)

Over the next couple of weeks, strange, eldritch things began happening more and more often. Oh, eldritch things had always happened in the world, but so rarely that they were often dismissed, and the people who experienced them, even died because of them, were considered to have died by far more normal means.

But newscasters began to report of strange, feral horses with waterweed in their hair appearing throughout Europe, somehow beguiling people into lakes. The next day their human livers washed ashore. They were ascribing it to some kind of communicable disease, a sort of shared madness, but any attempts to find and kill the horses failed. And some of the search teams themselves had been drowned. There were warnings throughout the United Kingdom especially to stay away from still bodies of water. Special government task forces were being created to investigate.

At the same time, the USA experienced a sudden surge of reports of a little misshapen girl with an evil reek about her, attacking homeless people. Police found their dried out husks the next day and the deaths of rough sleepers – those without homes, even truckers sleeping in their trucks – skyrocketed. Some of the people of Detroit began to talk about how the Nain Rouge had found her way out of the boundaries of their state. They had always been aware of her presence.

Jack knew of this because North kept him updated. Adults and children were both being targeted, and North was thinking of summoning the Guardians together even if the Globe itself wasn't showing anything too awry. But the Globe was tuned to belief in the Guardians, not the deaths of adults and children. The Man in the Moon was staying quiet, understandably, as the Moon was waning.

North let Jack know that he was keeping Bunnymund and Sandy the most informed, since Bunnymund had a great deal of knowledge about other spirit beings in the world. And Sandy encountered most of the world's children every night. Jack was to keep his eyes open. Jack didn't see much on his travels, and because of the heavy weight of depression that lingered, he didn't travel as much as he probably should have.

One day, he listlessly traced the whorls of bark on a tree bough that he was resting on. Frost followed the twists and turns of the bark as he began to absently trail his fingers back and forth.

He was – though he wouldn't ever tell anyone else about this – thinking about Pitch. He was thinking that if Pitch had his shadows removed, instead of having sent them out to do his bidding, then he was probably more alone than usual. And he was thinking that he had no idea how long Pitch had been without those living shadows for, and that it must have been difficult.

Jack found empathy easy. Like Toothiana, he thought about what other people were going through, the pains they held within them. He knew how loss could change a person, he knew how loneliness could make everything seem duller. It made his ability to create fun all the more special. He knew exactly how much the presence of fun in a child's life could lift their hearts, whether they

just needed a day off school, or to have their minds taken off the passing of a parent or a family pet.

It wasn't that he wanted to feel anything for Pitch, it was just that he couldn't stop thinking of the similarities between them. His mind kept coming back to the encounter he'd had with Pitch in Antarctica. Granted, a great deal of that had been terrible, it had ended badly, but he'd seen facets of Pitch that – now – he thought might have been genuine.

Jack watched frost curl around a twig and thought of Pitch in the darkness without his shadows for years possibly.

Tiredness marked his days. The loss of Jamie was something that North hadn't referred to again, and the only person who seemed to remember Jamie at all were his family, friends, and one lonely frost spirit. He felt like no one else really understood, and he hated that he felt he had things in common with Pitch. The Nightmare King had tried to destroy them all!

But no matter how many times Jack reminded himself of this, his mind crept back to the Pitch without his shadows. The Pitch who could be hurt and thrown against a stone wall without a second thought. Who had furniture and a bed, and told Jack that his fear tasted delicious and had threatened him, but hadn't actually hurt him with anything other than well-placed words.

Jack sat up and looked at Mora, who was lying down on another bough, legs tucked neatly under her.

'Do you want to go see Pitch again?' he said, and she was up and on the winds faster than he thought possible. He laughed. 'Okay, okay, we'll go. But don't like, get too comfortable or anything. Okay?'

In answer, she galloped ahead of him, tossing her head in excitement, tail streaming behind her as she picked up speed. He tumbled off the bough and fell a few metres before he let the winds catch him.

He found his way to Pitch's lair. Down he went through the darkness again, into the heat of Pitch's strange underworld. He moved warily through the gigantic cavern where the Baby Teeth had been imprisoned all that time ago, past the rusting cages, those still hanging from the ceiling of the cavern and those lying sideways, broken, on the dusty stone floor.

Jack trusted in the cave winds to help him find his way, down further into the heat of the earth, all the way to the side tunnel that hopefully hid a wooden door in all that impenetrable blackness. Mora was unafraid, her glowing eyes offering an eerie light in the dark.

Jack found the place easily enough, though he had to take a deep breath before going into those shadows himself. Complete blackness still gave him pause, even now. It didn't matter how much time passed, it would always remind him of the lake. He felt around the door until he found a handle, and then – hoping it would not be locked – turned it.

The door swung open on a whimpering creak, warm light poured out yet again.

Jack was just about to enter when Pitch suddenly appeared with a silver long-sword gripped expertly between two hands. The point was aimed directly at Jack's heart.

Jack took a shuddering breath, his eyes widened. His body temperature plummeted and he all but forgot about his staff. But by the time he began to collect his thoughts, Pitch dramatically rolled his eyes, lowered the sword and turned around.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ he said, not bothering to give Jack a backwards glance as he walked away. He opened one of the giant, looming wooden cabinets, put the sword back inside of it.

‘You were expecting someone else?’ Jack said, dropping the cave winds and walking in on the slate-like floors.

‘Would you like some tea?’ Pitch said, evading the question. Jack narrowed his eyes as he looked at the huge, cast iron kettle resting on the table. Beside it was an ornamented ceramic mug, which looked out of place amongst all the rock and stone. Pitch withdrew another ceramic mug from a cabinet, just as ornamented, and set it down by a large, wooden chair.

‘You mean poison?’ Jack said.

Mora picked her way around the outer edges of the room, before finally coming to rest by the wooden chest in the shadows.

‘Tea.’

‘I only drink iced tea,’ Jack said, grinning. Pitch looked up and sighed as though Jack was the most tiresome thing he had come across all day.

‘Of course you do.’

‘What the hell was that sword? You look like you know how to use it. How come I’ve never seen it before?’

‘I never needed it then,’ Pitch said, turning his empty teacup on its saucer. ‘The shadows made the weapons I desired.’

‘But you need it now?’ Jack said, looking at the cabinet where it was stored. He wondered what else was in there. ‘Because of what happened to you? Is that it? Did you think I’d be one of the people who attacked you?’

Jack remembered how determined and competent Pitch had looked, holding the long-sword and staring down whatever was coming his way. If Pitch was in league with whomever had taken his shadows, then why would he have been so quick to defend himself? That sword looked like serious business.

‘Who attacked you? Why did they steal your shadows? Did they steal all of them?’

Pitch poured himself the tea and then sat down at the table, considering Jack soberly before he answered.

‘Yes.’

‘How long ago? How long have you been down here just...like this?’

Pitch sighed melodramatically.

‘Long the years have been since that night.’

‘Well, *that’s* helpful,’ Jack said, and Pitch sipped at his tea almost primly before setting down the cup.

‘Turnaround being fair play and all that, answer me this. *Why* do you keep coming here? I know you mustn’t be comfortable in this heat. In this tomb of rock and stone. And you know that I am

the type to use Jamie's death against you, if not anything else I can get my hungry hands on. Yet here you are.'

Jack walked forwards carefully, holding his staff out to the side in an unthreatening manner. He looked at the ornamented cup that Pitch had set out from him from the distance of about a metre. It showed an unusual amount of craftsmanship. It was something that Jack wouldn't have guessed the Nightmare King cared for. He always imagined that while he was surrounded by shadows, he was mostly just concerned with lurking in the dark. A lot. It made him uncomfortable to see these other sides to Pitch

'North says that we all have some kind of essence. You know; fun, memories, wonder. What's it like, your essence being fear?'

Pitch looked bemused for a moment, and Jack caught the way he briefly drummed his fingers on the table, one after the other, neatly. He had seen piano players with hands like that.

'Firstly, I have no *idea* what you're talking about, though it sounds like the kind of nice fairytale Santa would tell a baby frost spirit. And secondly, you didn't answer my question.'

Jack sat down, frustrated, and began playing with the cup. He lifted it, turned it upside down, spun it with a small ping of frost. Pitch leaned forwards and took it away from him, and set it out of reach. They both scowled at each other and then Jack tried to remember why he'd been so annoyed in the first place.

'*Firstly*, I'm around three hundred and fifty years old, no spring chicken here. And I don't know. The first time I came was because of Mora. I didn't realise where we were going because I had my mind on other things. The second time was because North wanted to check things out and that sleigh is really cool. I mean, have you seen it? It's amazing! It's just awesome.'

'Cool? *Awesome*? Are you sure you're three hundred years old? You seem a few centuries shy of a full deck there,' Pitch said, and Jack closed his mouth around a breath of laughter, which escaped quietly through his nose. This was not what he was here for! He was not here for banter! He was not here to exchange pleasantries with someone who had destroyed children's lives. He was about the very *opposite* of that.

'And now we are up to the third time, and you cannot fall back on Mora, or North. Here you are, sitting with me at this table like we are at the very least colleagues.'

'I want to know what happened to you!' Jack said, standing up and pointing like that would somehow better convey his point. 'Bad things are starting to happen already and you know more about this than any of us. Do you know any of the people who did this to you?'

'Three of them,' Pitch said, taking another sip of his tea. 'One I knew well. Two by sight only. And the last one was unfamiliar to me.'

'So it was four against one,' Jack said. He began to think that was unfair until a part of his brain reminded him that it had taken five Guardians to bring Pitch down last time.

'Yes, I must be getting soft in my dotage,' Pitch said shaking his head at himself.

'They must be pretty powerful,' Jack said, looking around the room, trying to imagine what creatures were strong enough to take the living shadows away like that. The caves seemed lifeless without them. Also a great deal less terrifying.

'You *must* miss them,' he said, absently.

‘Pardon me?’ Pitch said, confused.

‘Toothiana has her Baby Teeth. North has his yeti and his elves. Bunnymund has his little eggs and the stone warriors. And you had those shadow things. So I was just thinking it must be lonely.’

Pitch smiled coldly at that and Jack automatically spread his stance. He often felt like he had to physically prepare himself for the cutting force that was Pitch. There was something a little too self-satisfied about Pitch’s gleeful expression.

‘It’s like you don’t actually understand what projecting means! I don’t believe *you* have anything other than the wind.’

‘Is it lonely?’ Jack asked, angry and forceful now, blue threads of ice starting to crackle along his staff. Pitch’s smile broadened to see the reaction and he stayed like that for a moment, as though savouring Jack’s loneliness. And then his expression fell away to something sadder, vulnerable. Pitch looked down into his tea as though he could scry secrets from it, he sighed.

‘You assume they were mine to begin with,’ he said, without looking up, ‘but they were not.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means what it means,’ Pitch said, as though that explained everything.

‘It’s just,’ Jack said suddenly, tired of these cryptic conversations, ‘remember Antarctica?’

Pitch’s eyes narrowed, he sat straighter. He made eye contact, and Jack was struck by how unusual the colour of his eyes were, how hypnotic. Even when he wasn’t trying to induce fear in others, there was something electric about meeting Pitch’s eyes.

‘I know, I *know* you were just trying to take advantage of me. Right? I know that. But some of what you said was true. I’d be lying if it hadn’t crossed my mind since then, okay? That we both know what loneliness is like. That, oh, this is ridiculous!’ Jack shook his head at himself as though he could erase everything he’d just said, and he turned on his heels to walk out.

‘Thanks for the offer of tea,’ he muttered, and had one hand on the door handle when he heard the chair behind him scrape back against the floor, echoing loudly in the stone room. Jack turned to look over his shoulder, and Pitch stared at him, a strange shock on his face.

‘Not going to say anything?’ Jack taunted, when a minute passed. ‘Not going to make fun of me again? About how desperate I am? About projection?’

Pitch tilted his head at Jack, eyes squinted as though he hadn’t seen the frost spirit before. His speechlessness was something that Jack would have enjoyed at any other point except now, when he wanted to know where they stood. When he wanted some kind of guarantee that Pitch wouldn’t simply lash out with words or deeds and betray him and his vulnerability again. He always made the stupidest decisions around Pitch.

Mora stood up suddenly and whickered, agitated.

Jack was thrown backwards when the door boomed open. He looked up from the floor, hip aching where it had caught his fall.

A young girl, only about eight or nine stood there. Jack saw immediately that she was surrounded by coils of *living* shadow, Fearlings, Nightmare Men. Her eyes were a solid blood-brown, her hands were twisted and covered in soot and gristle. She wore red fur boots and a dress made of a poorly

cured animal pelt. Her lips were thin and torn.

She looked down at Jack on a neck that moved like it had been broken, and Jack felt fear pound through him. Her youthful size was deceiving, her expression was dead, amused, filled with malice.

Jack scrambled backwards on his palms and then he awkwardly pushed himself up into a standing position. He chanced a glance at Pitch, whose jaw was clenched.

'Jack, Nain Rouge. Nain Rouge, Jack.' The words were gritted out of him, and though he didn't look afraid, Jack could see that he was clearly unhappy that she was here.

'Whatevs,' the Nain Rouge said, voice crackling and far older than anyone who looked that young had a right to sound. The shadows behind her shifted and roiled like smoke rising from a volcano; unsettled and dangerous.

Her opaque eyes, devoid of light, cast around the room until she saw Mora trembling near the shadows by Pitch's bed. Her lips peeled back on a grin that showed teeth far more decayed and disgusting than the Nightmare King's. She stepped deeper into the room, living shadow and moaning Fearlings following her, attached and responding to her whim.

Jack wondered what she could possibly want with Mora.

'I'm mad as hell that I missed you! I thought I got all of them!'

On an invisible command the living shadows surged forwards like a tsunami. Mora was in danger. He had a horrible image of her being surrounded by all that blackness and ran forwards, drawn to action.

'Hey!'

The frost that crackled through his staff shot forward like a bolt of blue lightning. Jack sent out more frost, knowing none of it would last long down here in the oppressive heat of the caves. He sent waves of it out like a battering ram. He only stopped when he was able to block Mora from the shadows with his body. He stared down at the spirit girl before him, teeth bared. He'd be damned if she was going to take Mora away from him. She was the only friend he had that he saw on a regular basis anymore. It was clear from her fear of Sandy, that she didn't want to be assimilated back into any kind of sand again. She was a mare who liked her autonomy, and he respected that.

'Fucking seriously?' she said, baring her teeth back at him. He thought it was a grimace until he realised it was her version of a smile. She looked delighted.

'Leave her alone!'

The Nain Rouge laughed.

'You're a frost spirit!' she crowed. 'I've always wanted to get me some of that.'

Jack didn't fully understand her threat, but he understood that it *was* a threat. He swept his staff out, pressing forward on one foot. Icicles formed in milliseconds and he hurled them at her. He wasn't going to let some creepy kid mess with him and Mora, regardless of how many shadows she had at her back. He'd kept the shadows at bay before, and he would again.

The Nain Rouge waved the icicles to the side and floated forward on a wave of darkness with

preternatural speed. Living shadows coiled around his limbs, burning him where they touched. The ice wasn't keeping them away! He shouted in fear when the darkness crested up around him, far higher than his body, blocking out the rest of the room. He was surrounded by darkness, the black eyes of Fearlings, the hungry gazes of Nightmare Men. When a Nightmare Man seized his staff between amorphous hands, he couldn't hang onto any of his confidence, he was awash with terror.

'Stop!' he shouted, struggling. 'Stop it!'

Through the wall of thick shadows in front of his face, the Nain Rouge swept forwards, the air almost crackling with her reek of decay. He gagged on it. He could only stare wide-eyed as she reached forward with a gristle and soot-coated hand, and pressed her palm and sticky fingers to his throat. As disgusting as it was, he felt a single wash of relief, because she couldn't choke him, he was already dead. He breathed because it was habit, but not because it was a crucial part of what kept him alive. Clearly she didn't know that. Maybe it gave him an advantage.

She pushed her head towards him, curious. Her breath washed over him, a miasma of rot. His throat went into spasm at the odour and he coughed.

Her fingers gripped sudden and hard at his throat. A tunnelling, invasive power blasted through him from her hand, he almost blacked out from the pain. Agony coursed through cells, seared at his lungs. He jerked hard against the imprisoning shadows, so hard that he got an arm free. But he was only able to flail for a second before the shadows had him again.

His eyes rolled up in the back of his head. She was taking something from him. He felt as though she had reached her hand inside of him and was rummaging around in his flesh, grabbing and poking. His teeth ached with a cold he didn't recognise, his head ached.

And then a chill, blue energy poured and coiled from his throat into her hand. He twitched, helpless, unable to voice words or shout, watching as the blue crept up her arm and created absurdly beautiful frost patterns as it went.

All the while she watched, smiled, drank in his pain with her eyes. There was no single hint of humanity anywhere in her. One of his last thoughts before he began to pass out was that she was never human to begin with.

He was almost insensate when there was a huge commotion. The shadows suddenly dropped him and withdrew. The Nain Rouge jumped backwards, her fingers released his throat. She was laughing like she'd won a prize.

Jack tried to collect himself, but his legs buckled and he slumped to the ground, gasping around the emptiness she'd left inside him. The hollowness of Jamie dying had extinguished something important. But this was different entirely. It felt like she had taken crucial organs from him, something was wrong.

Through blurry vision he saw Pitch standing there in front of him, holding the long-sword yet again, somehow keeping the shadows at bay and forcing the Nain Rouge back.

'There's only one of you, this time, and you'll not be strong enough to overcome me even with that cavalry of darkness at your back,' Pitch purred, sounding as easy and confident as he had ever sounded when baiting the Guardians.

Jack coughed, he tried to raise a hand to his burning, sore throat but his arm trembled too much. His fear would not abate even now that he was no longer surrounded by shadow. Something was wrong. He wanted, desperately, suddenly, for Toothiana to be there. She would understand. She

would worry and fret and pat him over and make sure everything was okay.

‘Whatevs,’ the Nain Rouge said, ‘You have no fucking idea who I am really, do you? Jesus. Amateurs. Anyway, I’m sure *he’ll* be super impressed that you managed to keep one of those stupid sand horses from me. Not. He doesn’t give a shit about you. Or so he likes to think. I only came down here to see if I missed anything. One stupid horse isn’t worth it. But him?’ she took her gaze off Pitch’s sword and looked hungrily at Jack. ‘*You* were worth it.’

The Nain Rouge swept the shadows around her until she was raised up at Pitch’s eye level.

‘They listen to *me* now,’ she gloated.

Jack watched as Pitch seemed to swell with rage. Suddenly he was only holding the sword with one hand, and the other hand he thrust forwards, fingers apart and shaking. Jack couldn’t tell what he was trying to do.

The Nain Rouge laughed again, she moved her arms and the shadows fell behind her quickly.

‘See? They’re not gonna come back to you. They don’t want *you*. They want us! And they’re very fucking happy with *me*. We’re going to be the strongest! It’s time for the rise, shadow man. Whatever. I can come back later for that stupid horse.’

She turned to Jack, grinned down at him.

‘Cheers for this,’ she said, and then made a solid ball of ice and shadow in her hand and threw it at him. Jack was too injured to attempt to get out of the way. His eyes widened as it flew at him, but before it could hit, Pitch’s sword rose and fell, shattering it. Jack saw the frost fragment and fall to the ground. The shadows evaporated into nothing. *That’s my power. She just used my power against me.* He felt ill. Nausea swept through him and he swallowed it down and winced. His throat hurt.

Pitch charged furiously towards the Nain Rouge. She turned tail and fled into the black tunnel and then she and the shadows disappeared, an echo of her smug, childish laughter following behind her.

Pitch stood by the doorframe, two hands on the hilt of his sword. And then he lowered it to the ground, the point squeaking on the stone. His shoulders slumped.

He closed the door, turned to face Jack. His lips curled in disgust and Jack felt embarrassed by his weakness. He did not want to be vulnerable like this in front of Pitch! He tried to get up, but he was still too drained. He managed nothing more than a jerky series of movements that kept him anchored to the floor.

Pitch walked forwards and knelt beside him. He put his sword down. From Jack’s perspective, little things became more noticeable. He could see more of the gold embroidery on Pitch’s robe now, as though the blackness had been rubbed away to reveal more of the pattern underneath. The sword itself looked ancient and powerful, and this close was engraved with the faintest of an alphabet he didn’t recognise.

Then he saw Mora’s hooves pacing, agitated, in the distance. Relief flooded him that she was okay, that she hadn’t been absorbed and destroyed in that darkness. Pitch followed his gaze.

Pitch looked back down at him, speculative. Jack stared back up, and all of the events of the evening ran quickly through his mind and his eyes widened on a jolt.

‘You just saved my life!’ he gasped in shock. His voice was thready, uneven. Pitch frowned at that.

He didn't reply, instead he stood and picked up the sword and took it back to the cabinet. Instead of putting it away, he withdrew a giant sheath and then put both on the table. The sheath made a huge *thunking* noise as he set it down. Pitch picked up his cup of tea and drained it in a single gulp and then walked back to Jack again, kneeling beside him.

'She would have killed you,' he said, grim.

'Yeah, I got that-I got that impression. What did she do to me?'

'Your frost is a part of you. She took some of it. If I hadn't intervened, she would have taken it all. Your frost, that cold, wintery well of ice; it is what the Man in the Moon gave you, and it is your animating life force. Without it, poof! You would simply cease to be.'

'Well,' Jack said, finally getting his arm under his body and managing, with an extreme amount of effort, to push himself into a crouch. 'Well, that's a lovely thought.'

'Isn't it?' Pitch said, and Jack glowered when he saw the playful smile at the edge of his lips.

Pitch did not offer any assistance as Jack pushed himself up further into a sitting position. He felt like a doll whose strings had been cut. Even now, his insides felt scoured out and scraped up, the back of his eyes burned with tears. He refused to shed them, not now, not in front of Pitch. Something terribly invasive had happened to him. Pitch had explained it so calmly, but it didn't feel like something calm had happened. He hadn't even known he could be injured like that.

To reassure himself, he sent out a wisp of frost on his fingers. And the frost came, it answered him, but he could already feel it. There was less in the well of energy he'd always had to draw from. Less resonating power answered him when he called on it.

'Wait,' he said, turning to Pitch. 'Shouldn't it have killed you? Aren't the shadows an animating part of your...whatever?'

Pitch frowned.

'No. They never were. What happened to me sundered me from an army. What happened to you has sundered you from a part of your life-force. Can you stand?'

'I don't...' He looked down at himself, then scowled at Pitch. 'A little help maybe?'

The answering expression he got was almost bewildered. Jack guessed that maybe not many people asked for his help. It seemed to take Pitch a moment to organise his limbs, and then strong hands moved under his arms. As Pitch stood up, Jack was raised into a standing position. The hands withdrew almost immediately, and Jack's knees started to buckle again.

'Ah, whoops,' Pitch muttered, returning his hands and stabilising Jack, leaving a palm between his shoulder blades and another bracing his upper arm. Jack felt ashamed of his weakness, that of all the people to see him like this, it was someone who generally fit the definition of arch-nemesis. *Though, Jack thought, maybe not so much anymore.*

'Whatever that sword is made of, it worked. I can't believe you, of all people, got the shadows to back off.'

'Yes, even I cannot escape that irony right now. Thanks for the reminder,' Pitch said, sour.

'Anytime,' Jack muttered.

And then he became aware of the warmth of Pitch's palm through his hoodie, which was dry and oddly soothing. The hand gripping his forearm to keep him forcibly upright if necessary wasn't painful, not clawed fingers digging in, but softly enclosing. It scared him that he liked it so much. He shivered and hoped that Pitch would attribute it to the aftermath of the attack.

'You saved my life,' Jack said again, feeling dazed and stupid.

'Please, I just didn't want to give her the satisfaction. She's a bratty little monster.' But the words didn't ring entirely true. Jack raised his eyebrows in wonder, but couldn't think to say anything as a wave of fatigue washed over him.

'We should leave,' Pitch said softly. 'This place isn't good for you. It's not safe for Mora. And I clearly cannot continue to live here. You should inform your dear fellow Guardians that the Unseelie Court have the power to remove their animating forces. That little urchin could – I think – easily suck any one of you dry. And as much as I would love to see that happen, I'm not sure I would love to see it happen at the hands of those particular folk.'

'You have to come with me,' Jack said, 'you'll describe it better.'

'When, exactly, will I describe it better? Before or after the Guardians have locked me up in a prison and left me to rot?'

'I was thinking hopefully *before*,' Jack said, shifting his feet until he felt a bit more stable. Pitch hesitantly removed the palm at Jack's back, and then his arm, and when Jack was able to stand on his own, Pitch stepped back. Jack almost missed the warmth.

He watched as Pitch bent down to pick his staff. The action still sent a thrill of fear through him. He would never forget how it felt to have Pitch simply snap it in two. But instead Pitch came back and handed it to him, and Jack used it as a third limb for extra balance, feeling more like himself.

Mora sidled up to him from the side, gentle and – if Jack could guess – almost grateful that she hadn't been taken by that creature. He was so glad she was alright. As she got closer, he felt the tingling of fear that she could cause. He reached out his arm for her warm, sandy head, and she tucked it under, pressing against his rib-cage.

The fear welled stronger, and the resilience that he could usually pull from to get through it had deserted him. He made a strangled noise and began to buckle once more. Mora stepped quickly backwards as Pitch's long arms shot out and steadied him again.

'Perhaps not right now, sweetling,' Pitch said gently to Mora. He looked down his aquiline nose at Jack in exasperation. He stepped back again and Jack stayed standing. And then Jack tried walking a few steps and found it wasn't quite as bad as he thought it would be. If he used his staff as a sort of crutch, it was fine.

'You have to come. You're in this, whether you like it or not,' Jack said, stubbornly, ignoring how his voice went reedy on certain words.

Pitch shook his head and walked away.

'I think not.'

A rush of anger filled Jack and it galvanised him. He was tired of this. If he hadn't come here, maybe none of this would have happened. He'd be depressed, sure, but depression wasn't his *power being sucked out through his throat*. He swallowed down a sob of outrage and turned away.

‘Fine! You know what? Fine. I’ll do it myself.’

He managed six or seven very sturdy steps before his strength gave way again and he fell to his knees. The stone hit his kneecaps hard and he bit his tongue in his rush to stop crying out in pain.

This is day has been the worst.

When his vision cleared, Pitch was standing over him yet again.

‘I guess I am coming with you after all,’ he said, clearly unhappy at the prospect. ‘Honestly, the things I get myself into.’

Augus Each Uisge

Chapter Notes

Phew! I actually think this fic will end up topping out at around 20 chapters. Also, thanks for all your continued comments and kudos and subscriptions and so on. You are all wonderful!

Jack dragged himself back into a standing position, angry at his body, angry at how weak he felt. It occurred to him that in hundreds of years of falling out of trees or sometimes misjudging a playful sweep of wind, he hadn't felt like this. Even Pitch breaking his staff had only been a shadow of what he was feeling now. His legs were weak, the heat was getting to him. He wiped at his forehead and was surprised to see the wetness of sweat on the back of his hand.

'What was she?' Jack said, 'aside from an evil brat, obviously.'

'She's one of the newest members of the Unseelie Court. Imagine a fairy. Now imagine a very *bad* fairy,' Pitch said, spreading his arms wide to indicate how bad.

'She didn't look like a fairy,' Jack mumbled. 'I mean, I know they don't always have wings. But...'

'Whatever she is, she's a part of the Unseelie Court. That's close enough for me,' Pitch said, beckoning Mora over. The Nightmare walked tentatively forwards, having backed right off since she realised that she'd made Jack weaker. Even now, she watched Jack warily, keeping one ear trained on him at all times.

Jack watched, weary and sore, as Pitch ran a hand alongside Mora's cheek and then whispered something directly into her other ear. The streamlined horse turned to give Jack one last look, and then galloped into the darkness, away from the both of them.

'I've told her to leave and look after herself, and to return to you once it's safe. She can trace your energy, you know. She is *attuned* to your fear. They don't normally get that attached,' Pitch said, pensive.

Jack didn't know what to say. He didn't know what drew her close or what kept her by his side. He liked to think that maybe he offered a measure of companionship, but maybe it was just that she could feed off the nightmares she could cause. He didn't think so. There were times when it was just the two of them in the air, and he *knew* they were having fun together.

With Mora gone, he felt alone. And when Pitch turned back to him with that same, cold, measuring gaze, he wanted to disappear.

'Did you ever suspect you would put your life on the line for a creature of darkness?' Pitch said, an unfathomable expression on his face.

'Mora might have started that way, but she's not like that now.'

'Oh?' Pitch walked over to the table and picked up the sword and placed it in the sheath he'd left on the table. He slung the huge weapon over his back, the black leather strap carved with the same ornate, gold markings that were becoming visible on small sections of his robe. When Pitch looked

at Jack again, a small smile played at the corner of his mouth.

‘You are *aware* that she still feeds on fear, and is nourished by nightmares? You are, of course, aware that she is a *Nightmare*?’

Jack ignored him, not feeling up to banter. It didn’t matter what Mora fed on or needed for nourishment. She offered him company, and she spent her life by his side, and he wasn’t going to lose another friend. Not after Jamie. He took a deep breath and resisted closing his eyes. His throat ached where the Nain Rouge had pulled the pure frost out of him.

‘Too tired to feel afraid, aren’t you?’ Pitch said, brows furrowing. He shrugged, shifting the strap so that it settled more comfortably. Jack watched him and tried to think about what he was going to do next. He was going to tell North, wasn’t he? He was going to be a good, responsible Guardian and let the rest know that there was some creepy kid out there sucking people’s powers from them. That seemed like the right thing to do.

‘We’ll go and see North. And then once you’ve told him what you know about all of this, we’ll be done. This has been the *opposite* of fun.’

Jack summoned a cave wind and jumped onto it, and then stumbled off it immediately, unable to keep his balance. He pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth to keep from swearing, and frost flared off his staff in his frustration. Even now it was still a smaller expression of his power than usual.

‘Come along,’ Pitch said, and walked past Jack, through the doorway and into the darkness. Jack followed him into the inky black, and immediately bumped into Pitch, who hissed in annoyance.

‘Maybe if you didn’t just *stand there*,’ Jack said, and then jumped when Pitch put an arm around him. ‘Hey! What are you doing? Get off!’

Pitch’s arm recoiled and the sigh that he heard, magnified in the total darkness, was filled with impatience.

‘How do you expect us to get to North’s, hmm? Are you going to simply walk out of here? No. You are coming with me, and we are teleporting through the shadows. I require contact to be able to do that. Especially now that I am *weaker*.’ The last word was spat out, as though disgusting.

‘You could’ve warned me,’ Jack said, swallowing and wincing as it aggravated the pain in his throat. He raised fingers to his neck and the skin felt warm instead of cold. He left his hand there, the cold of his own fingers was soothing.

A moment later, Jack tensed as he felt Pitch’s arm move around him again. A long-fingered hand which felt entirely too threatening, firmly gripped his upper arm.

And then the world spun and shattered. It was similar to moving through one of North’s portals, except that it was filled with fractured blackness, a thundering fear. Adrenaline flooded his body and his skin stretched tight and shivered.

And then he touched down on ice, surrounded by bluer shadows and able to see a light-source nearby. The air was no longer hot and oppressive, but crisply cold. He could hear the sounds of yeti and elves working in the factory, which was not too far away. There were cliffs of ice and rock rising up high on one side, and falling down away from them on the other. Pitch’s arm was already off his shoulders, and he’d stepped back. Beyond that, Jack wasn’t paying much attention.

The teleportation had been taxing and he dropped to his knees, hands spreading out onto the ice to

catch himself.

The ice actually felt *cold* to him, which wasn't normal. It felt amazing, like a food that he'd been without for too long. He held himself back from actually lowering his cheek to it, because he thought that might look a bit strange in front of someone who'd once tried to kill him, then saved his life, and was entirely too mercurial for comfort. But he moved his fingers over the cold and breathed in the frigidity of it through his nostrils, filling his lungs with colder air.

Pitch waited silently as Jack spent minutes finding some kind of new equilibrium.

After a while, Jack stood up, already feeling stronger.

'Better?'

Jack waved his staff and sent frost spiralling out into the cold air, and though he felt more balanced, he could feel – inside of him – the well of frost, his internal power source, it was still depleted. He turned to Pitch and opened his mouth to say something, but Pitch was already smiling at him.

'And look at that, he has enough energy to feel scared again.'

'Is this permanent? Being in the cold has helped, but...'

Jack sent out more frost, and more again, and each time he could feel it inside of him. He exhaled hard and gripped his staff harder, spinning and creating snowfall. He was able to successfully pull snow and frost forwards, but he was not as powerful as he used to be.

'Are you serious? It's *permanent*?' he said to no one, but Pitch decided to reply anyway.

'Is there any point where we could just get this over and done with?'

'What?' Jack glared at Pitch, who simply looked at a bare wrist with raised brows, pretending he had a watch there. It annoyed Jack to see him be so flippant when something serious was going on, when something terrible had just happened to him, and because he needed *Pitch's* help, of all people.

So, he did what he was sometimes prone to do in a moment of ire. He picked up some snow quietly, while Pitch was looking off at the factory, made a snowball, blew on it and threw it smack into Pitch's face.

The snow broke apart on impact, and Jack smiled as Pitch stumbled backwards, eyes squeezing shut, nose twitching. Jack laughed as Pitch's eyes widened comically. He raised a hand to his head.

'What did you just do to me? What was in that snowball?'

'What?' Jack said, feeling a shred of his former spark flare up, 'feeling something good for the first time in your entire life?'

Pitch glowered at him, and Jack laughed again. And then he slid his eyes sideways to look at an inoffensive wall of ice, because he knew that Pitch was going to do his fear-trick in retaliation. That was the last thing he needed.

Pitch noticed Jack look away, and then laughed deeply and darkly behind his closed mouth. Jack's eyes widened, Pitch had *laughed*.

Jack took a deep breath.

‘Ooookay, note to self! What Pitch considers a fun time is not what everyone else considers a fun time.’

‘Oh, come now, what else would you expect?’ Pitch said, and Jack could still hear the amusement in his voice.

‘So how should we do this? Because those yeti won’t let us in through the front doors or side doors if you’re with me. They don’t even like letting *me* in, when I’m on my own.’

‘It’s so wonderful to know that it’s not just me you’ve been harassing for all this time,’ Pitch said, and Jack rolled his eyes.

‘How’d you get in last time?’

‘Like this,’ Pitch said, and stepped forward and grasped Jack’s shoulder with his hand before Jack could step back. There was the hollow, awful sensation of travelling through a fractured darkness, and then he emerged on the other side of it, gasping and dizzy. It had taken more out of him a second time, and he became aware of crouching in shadows at the centre of a Christmas tree so gigantic that they were well hidden and some distance from the edges of the branches reaching out from the base of the trunk.

Next to him, Pitch knelt and hadn’t yet removed his hand. He kept it flat on Jack’s shoulder blade, a stabilising presence. Jack felt absurdly grateful for it, though he’d never tell Pitch that much. That the Boogeyman, with the touch of his hand, could offer something comforting was simply too surreal.

‘As a method of travel, it has its drawbacks,’ Pitch said very softly, and Jack grit his teeth together.

‘Oh yeah?’ he hissed.

‘Yes. Are you- are you okay?’ Pitch said it hesitantly, as though the words felt strange in his mouth.

‘How many children have gone through this? That you’ve terrified?’ he said, and Pitch’s hand shifted minutely and then withdrew.

‘Many,’ he said, and Jack forced himself to crawl away from Pitch. He still felt weak. He wondered if sleep would help him recharge properly.

Pitch followed him, but at a distance of about a metre. He didn’t look happy to be back in North’s Workshop, and Jack didn’t really feel like dealing with this either. Being responsible was a drag even when he was at full energy. Sure, it had been fun when he was getting something out of it; saving children, being believed in, learning about his past, remembering his sister, cementing his friendship with Jamie...but otherwise, it was just ‘all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.’ He preferred uncomplicated thoughts, straightforward fun. Life had been doling out too much complexity lately, too much pain.

They had been transported to the very floor where North held his meetings with the Guardians. It wasn’t long before Jack saw some of the others. Bunnymund, arguing with North in the distance about something. Toothiana, flitting around and looking into the mouths of elves and yeti, wondering out loud if they had any tooth guardians of their own. So much for pooling together their knowledge on who might be causing the strange deaths around the world.

North noticed Pitch and Jack the same time that a few yeti did. North's eyes widened in horror, and several yeti rushed towards Pitch. Suddenly Pitch's wry comment about whether he'd be invited to talk before or after he was put in a prison seemed relevant.

'Wait!' Jack shouted. 'No! Wait a minute! Wait, wait, *wait!*'

He swung his staff in a semi circle blocked the yeti off with a wall of ice. They slammed into it, and then backed off, wary. The wall of ice wasn't nearly as tall or as thick as Jack had tried to make it, but it still worked.

'What is this?' North said, stepping forward. Toothiana flew beside him and glared at Pitch. Bunnymund withdrew his boomerang.

'Just *wait* a minute,' Jack said, 'tell your furry goons to back off. He's got information. Okay? He's got information about what's been happening.'

'Yes, probably because he is being a part of it, Jack,' North said, reaching around his waist for sabres that weren't there. When he realised that, he balled his giant hands into fists instead. Pitch hadn't moved, and stood near the wall of ice impassively.

'He saved my life, okay?' Jack said, wincing as he said it, because he still expected it to be a lie. 'He saved my life. I was attacked by the Nain Rouge. Have any of you ever-'

'*What?*' North said, looking at Jack in concern. 'Are you-'

'Oh!' Toothiana interrupted, moving forward and ignoring Jack's outstretched staff, 'oh no, look at your throat! Are you okay?' Her fingers moved over his neck and he made a small noise of pain as it flared up, raw. He hadn't seen what it looked like, but it was obviously visible to everyone else. Immediately she began fussing over his hair, and a moment later she reached forward with easy familiarity and opened his mouth.

'But your teeth are okay!'

'My teeth are fine, Tooth,' he muttered, jerking to the side. North and Bunnymund were looking at each other, each with grave expressions on their faces.

Pitch stepped forwards, and everyone spun to face him. But he stopped when he drew level with Jack. He looked around, desultorily, at the Workshop itself and then down at Jack, like he couldn't wait to be out of there. He drew himself up a little taller and then faced North calmly. He opened his mouth to speak, when Bunnymund stepped forwards, his own mouth dropping open in shock, ears dropping behind him.

'*Kozmotis?*' he breathed, and Pitch flinched as if struck. Jack didn't understand what the word meant, nor did Toothiana. But North's entire demeanour changed. He squinted at Pitch and leaned forwards, looking him up and down, taking in the sword, the leather strap, the hints of pattern that had appeared on his robe. And then his eyes widened, first with fear, and then with *wonder*. Jack turned to look at Pitch himself, but they were seeing something that he couldn't. And that word, Kozmotis, was that a *name*? What kind of a name was that?

'That's not Pitch,' Bunnymund said, almost to himself.

'What?' Toothiana said, looking at Bunnymund like he was mad, 'I can see him. That is obviously Pitch. I mean his teeth alone...'

Pitch cleared his throat, uncomfortable. He looked away from Bunnymund and then focused

instead on North.

‘Some time ago, when I was a darker creature, there were dark beings who already existed on this earth who I encountered. I made sport of some, indulged others. One wanted me to join him in a coalition of malice, but I did not indulge him. Since then, he has gained the highest station of power in that world. He has his Inner Court. They are strong. The Unseelie Court, I believe, is no longer happy to stay restricted to their own realms. A group of four opened my *prison*, and the Nain Rouge, with the help of Augus Each Uisge, Ash Glashtyn and a wight I am not familiar with sundered me from the shadows I had – up until that point – shared my life with. I assume they wanted to make a final move against the Seelie Court and needed more power. And-’

‘And a league of bleedin’ shadows and Nightmare Men from the Constellations would do it,’ Bunnymund said, running a paw over his ears and then putting his boomerang back.

‘Then these happenings...This is the Unseelie Court pushing out of their fairyland and into this world? This is very bad,’ North said, turning and looking at the globe lit up with the beliefs of children. ‘We must do something, but we must also be careful. We protect *children*, the affairs of those who are grown are not our domain.’

Pitch laughed low.

‘You really think the Unseelie Court would be content to leave the children alone?’

‘Is it really you?’ Bunnymund said in a strange, disbelieving voice, tilting his head one way, and then the other.

‘The Nain Rouge,’ Pitch continued, ignoring Bunnymund and getting through the chore of informing everyone as quickly as he possibly could, ‘attacked Jack and took some of his life-force. I was not able to get to my sword in time to prevent it. The upstart is exceptionally strong, and able to pull the powers of another. Should she get a chance to attack any one of you, it could have fatal results. And now,’ he bowed with a little flourish, ‘my job is done. I hope to *never* see a single one of you again.’

He turned to leave, and Jack watched him, confused. He was torn. Normally he would stay behind with the rest of the Guardians, but he wanted more information, and he wanted it from Pitch. Who had Pitch been before he had been joined with the shadows? And had he chosen to recruit the shadows himself, or had something else happened? Did that explain the sword, the ornate robe, and the teacups, this evidence of another life, another person? And if so, who was that person, and how different was he to the malevolent being they had all had to group together to fight against decades before?

But before he could decide what to do, the floor rumbled. A sound of shrieks, shouts and grumbles from the yeti. Then howls of pain from the yeti that made North lurch forwards angrily. Pitch reached his hands up automatically and drew his sword, holding it across his body, ready to use it. Jack tilted his staff forwards. Bunnymund drew out his boomerang yet again. Toothiana, not wanting to be outdone, flitted over to an unused fireplace and drew out a poker, brandishing it. Her feathers flared out, battle ready.

Into the room walked a young man who looked only to be only in his mid-twenties. His skin was a pale olive, and very clear. He was smartly dressed, wearing buckled, black boots, a pale green button-up shirt with a collar, and black, tight pants. In his mess of long, wet, wavy black hair, waterweed tumbled and dripped water onto the ground. His eyes were an uncanny lake-weed green.

Behind him, an army of Nightmares, less lithe than Pitch’s Nightmares. Something had shifted

them into a more appealing, pony-like form. But they still had feral, red-orange eyes, and their presence was still dark and hungry.

‘Greetings,’ the man said smoothly, eyeing each of the Guardians. When his gaze alit on Pitch, he looked genuinely shocked for several seconds, then offered a little bow and a mischievous smirk.

‘Nightmare Kin-’ the being paused, ‘no, wait, what *should* we be calling you now?’

He didn’t wait for a reply. He folded his hands in front of him and turned back to the others.

‘My name is August Each Uisge, Silvery King of the Unseelie Court. This is merely a courtesy call. Leave us alone and we’ll let you keep all of your twee, quaint traditions. You may have less children to court with your trinket toys or thin-shelled eggs, but you will have children, and their beliefs in you will likely be more fervent than ever. They are going to need hope, after all.’

‘Yeah?’ Bunnymund said, ‘and what happens if we don’t leave you alone, eh?’

August turned to look at Bunnymund and smiled in a charming, beguiling manner.

‘We will kill you. Your immortality is predicated on your life force, and there is one in the Unseelie Court who can remove it from you. I believe that you,’ he turned to look at Jack with sudden, bright intensity, ‘have experienced that already. Given that you’re still standing, I’d say you got off lightly, all things being equal.’

Jack scowled. He didn’t feel like he’d gotten off pretty light. Sure, he wasn’t dead (again), but he’d gone hundreds of years without feeling like this, and it came as a deep shock to his equilibrium. There had been a sameness about his health, a reliable, centuries long strength to his body. Having it disturbed, not knowing if it was permanent, both things disturbed him deeply.

August Each Uisge turned back to Pitch and his expression sobered, and then turned grim. It was a frightening thing to see, more than just a thinning of his lips; his eyes flashed with an animal-light that turned him wild and fey. It made the shape of a man that he was wearing seem like costume hiding the monster beneath.

‘I thought we told you to stay put in case we needed you later. In fact I’m *certain* of it,’ he said, and though his tone was light, the room seemed palpable with his presence. Jack felt from him something that he’d felt from the Nain Rouge, a true, inhumane malicious energy.

‘My sincere apologies,’ Pitch said, with a voice dripping heavily with insincerity, ‘I became bored.’

But Jack knew that wasn’t true. He hadn’t gotten the sense that Pitch was moving around aboveground once his underground home and prison had been opened again.

August nodded, as though Pitch had said something very interesting.

‘Thinking of joining them, are you?’ August said, gesturing to the other Guardians without looking at them. Behind him, his newly shaped Nightmares looked around curiously, pawed the ground. Jack suddenly wished Sandy were there to call the Nightmares back to him and transform them. And yet, as Jack looked at them all, he wondered how many of them were like Mora, with a sense of self, and things they enjoyed doing, and people they preferred to become attuned to. More questions, more things he didn’t have answers for.

‘Please,’ Pitch said, insulted. But he didn’t lower his sword. Although he wasn’t a fan of the Guardians, he also wanted nothing to do with the Each Uisge. Jack wondered what was in the

sword that it was so effective against the shadows. Wondered why Pitch would have a sword that could drive the shadows back, hiding with him underground all this time. Had he stolen it from someone so they couldn't attack him? Or did it have it before? Jack's mind reeled at the idea of a *before*.

And all the time, a tiredness pressing behind his eyes. He needed rest.

'How do we know you're not just going to come back and take our powers anyway?' Toothiana said shrewdly, flying forwards a little with her poker, eyes narrowing and ready to attack if necessary. But August simply laughed.

'Really? And what do we desperately need with the ability to animate eggs, or toys? And aside from flying and gleaming like a pheasant in heat, what exactly do you do again? Store memories? Work *quickly*? We don't need your portals, we fae have been travelling through all realms since before any of you existed. We have a vast reservoir of power that you could only begin to imagine. The only one who has a life force that is any *use* to us is him,' and he pointed with a single, curved black fingernail to Jack, whose eyes widened. 'Gaining the ability to bend winter to one's will is always a coup. But, young Jack Frost, we will leave you alone, if you leave us alone.'

'Yeah?' Jack said, grimly, 'I was leaving you alone when the Nain Rouge came and attacked me.'

'I can't account for the Nain Rouge. She's her own creature,' August said with a slimy smile. 'Now. I believe you mostly concern yourselves with children. Honestly, this should make your decision very easy. We tend to leave children alone.'

'Tend to?' North said, frowning. August ignored the question.

'Stay out of our way, we'll stay out of yours. I'm sure we're all mature enough that you don't need a show of power? But if you push us, we'll be more than happy to show you one. And with that, I must bid you good day.'

He offered a shallow bow, hair tumbling about his face and revealing more wet strands of dark green waterweed. He straightened up and looked at them all in turn. His eyes lingered on Pitch a moment, before he turned and walked out again. His gait was casual and easy, even relaxed. Jack believed that he'd not once felt threatened by any of them. The Nightmares had turned and were following him placidly, and a few minutes later they had gone. The main doors of North's Workshop closed with a resounding clang.

In that space, no one spoke. Pitch sheathed his sword in one fluid movement. Toothiana lowered her poker. Bunnymund stroked the boomerang thoughtfully and then turned back to Pitch, ears pushing forward in interest.

'I recognise that embroidery, I've seen it before...crikey, it must have been donkeys years ago,' he said, and Pitch looked down at his robes. It seemed that more of the gold threads were encroaching on the rest of the blackness. An ornate, geometric pattern augmented with curlicues chased its way around the hem, and then became more sparse and fragmented as it reached up. It hadn't revealed itself in full yet, but it looked like it wouldn't take too long for the robe to revert to its original state.

North cleared his throat.

'You are becoming what you once were, aren't you?'

Pitch shook his head.

'None of us can return to the past.' The words were sombre, even sad. He looked as weary as Jack felt.

'Guys, this is all really interesting,' Jack said, 'but is no one going to talk about the fact that some really scary folks are murdering people and I don't know if there's much we can do about it?'

North and Bunnymund exchanged another glance and then Bunnymund took a few steps forward and spread his giant paws, sighed.

'That's just it, mate. There's not much we *can* do. We're the Guardians of children, of their hopes and dreams and wonder and fun. Literally. We might seem really powerful and, sure, when it's Easter, or Christmas, or bedtime, or someone has lost a tooth, that's pretty true. But we're not major players here, and it's a mistake to think we are.'

'Really? Because it seems to me like King Creepiness wouldn't pay a personal call and warn off people he thinks are small potatoes.'

'It is because we have defeated the shadows before,' North said, running a hand through his beard thoughtfully. 'The darkness was that little extra *oomph* they need to perhaps conquer the Seelie Court, and push into our world. But, ah, we have dealt with shadows haven't we?' He looked at Pitch and nodded to himself, 'We are the only ones who have been able to do it so far.'

'You are fools,' Pitch said, laughing quietly. He rolled his eyes. 'I was a powerful enemy, yes, but let's get *real* here, shall we? If the Seelie Court can't get a handle on them? Well, I do suppose I'd like to see you *try*. At the very least, it will be vastly entertaining to watch each and every one of you fail.'

'Why is he here again?' Tooth said, glaring at him.

Jack watched it all with lessening interest. The events of the day were catching up with him and he was beginning to feel that if he didn't get out of there soon, he would collapse again. And then North and Toothiana would fuss over him and it was strange how only a little while ago, he wanted that more than anything, and now he just wanted to deal with what had happened on his own. If it was permanent, he was going to have to get used to it. What if he needed to rest more often? A part of him was fervently hoping that if he just got a few hours of sleep, his power would magically regenerate.

They all began to squabble about whether they should imprison Pitch, with – surprisingly – Bunnymund saying that it probably wasn't necessary, especially if he hadn't done anything damaging so far. Pitch stared at Bunnymund like he had been possessed.

Jack wanted to be more invested. He thought it would probably look better if he was awake and spry and racing around on the winds. But his throat ached. And even if the fear Mora inspired made him temporarily weaker, he missed her.

'Well, strategy and arguing isn't really my scene,' he said suddenly. 'I'm going to head off. North, will you keep me updated?'

'Are you sure you shouldn't stay?' Toothiana said. 'You really don't look well.'

'Yeah, I know, but it's nothing some sleep won't fix. Honest guys. You're the brains of the operation, and you should probably talk to Sandy as well. I can always come back tomorrow, right?' He smiled winningly, pulled on his strength to stand straight and achieve what was hopefully a bright, cheerful expression. Pitch didn't look like he believed it for a moment. He

raised a single brow at Jack as if to say, *Really?*

North looked torn. He walked up to Jack and looked at him closely, bent down and looked at his neck and then exhaled heavily.

‘Okay,’ Jack said, head pounding with increasing pain, ‘it looks nasty, but I’m still standing and I got here didn’t I? I’m fine! She only skimmed a little bit, I’m not powerless. I mean look!’

He pointed to his wall of ice that was still standing, and hadn’t yet begun to melt. An elf had a tongue stuck to it and other elves were trying to pull the elf off with exceeding amounts of force, stretching the tongue longer than was probably healthy.

‘Come back tomorrow, or next day. Yes? Some cold and snow will probably do you good, you’ve always done better outside.’

‘Exactly,’ Jack said.

If I don’t get out of here soon, this is going to get embarrassing. Fast.

North squeezed his shoulder affectionately, and then stood up straighter and turned to face Pitch.

‘And, what are we going to do with you?’

Jack didn’t stay to find out. He walked out, unwilling to summon a wind in case he couldn’t ride it. As he passed the yeti, they watched him warily, but stayed out of his way. Even Phil, who was yelling at the other yeti presumably for letting in the Each Uisge, waved him off without another glance. Closer to the doors, he noticed two yeti being tended by others, injured but still alive. Whatever Augustus had done, it looked bloody and painful.

The walk through the Workshop to the snowy outdoors was exhausting. Jack struggled to catch his breath, an old reflex he couldn’t quite shake. He leaned on his staff heavily as he walked east, hoping that the ice on his bare feet would give him more energy. *Come on*, he thought, *kick in already*. He wanted to rest in the bough of a tree, preferably with Mora nearby.

When he was a considerable distance away from the Workshop, he fell to his knees and then lay down on his stomach, pressing his hands and his face into the ice. He sucked in lungfuls of cold air, dug his nails in so that ice packed in under his short fingernails. He had nothing left to pull on. If he was going to sleep, he’d have to do it here, which was maybe for the best. At the very least, he could make it back to North’s Workshop once he woke up.

But he didn’t want to sleep out in the open. He didn’t want to be so weak that he couldn’t manage a simple walk without collapsing. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead hard into the ground. His throat closed painfully. He was *not* going to cry, damn it. The wind tugged at his clothing playfully, as though asking him to travel with it, and he wanted more than anything to simply jump on it and see if he could outpace his troubles, but he couldn’t.

He heard footsteps approaching and hoped it wasn’t one of North’s yeti, because he didn’t think he wanted to be transported in a sack back to the Workshop ever again.

But it was Pitch, on his own and clearly released by the Guardians, since no one was following him.

Great, Jack thought, pretty sure he couldn’t even stand up again at this point. *Just great.*

Who Are You, Anyway?

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a bit of Jack whump in it, because that's just how I roll.

Pitch stopped a metre away and crouched down. His expression was thoughtful, almost pitying. Jack rolled to his side and lifted his staff half-heartedly, to try and indicate that if he needed to, he could protect himself. It occurred to Jack that this might be ridiculous. Pitch had saved his life, right? Did he need to make a show of power around him? It's not like Pitch would believe it anyway.

'You're not well enough to travel as you usually do, are you?' Pitch said, and Jack laughed.

'How could you tell? Did me lying down unable to get up give it away?'

'I have been told my powers of observation are impeccable,' Pitch said, then looked around him. He pointed into the distance, and Jack was too tired to follow where he was pointing. If he had to walk there, it wasn't going to happen.

'There are shadows nearby, a short walk away. They are dark enough that I could help you leave.'

'Yeah, this whole you helping me thing is going to take some time to get used to.'

'I'm hoping it's temporary,' Pitch said, and then knelt forwards. Hands wrapped around his middle, underneath his arms, and then Pitch drew him upright into a supported standing position. Pitch was surprisingly gentle and adept through all of it. Jack's head was spinning, the extra exposure to the ice hadn't helped at all. He wouldn't be able to stand on his own, that was certain. Pitch shifted his grip awkwardly and then made a sound of frustration.

'I can't get an arm underneath you to support you over, you're too short.'

'Actually, I'm a perfectly normal height,' Jack managed, 'I think you'll just find that you're actually freakishly tall.'

Pitch paused, looking at Jack like he was a beetle.

'Don't ever tell *anyone* I did this. Or I will *kill* you,' Pitch seethed.

Jack was about to ask what the hell he was talking about when Pitch actually scooped him up with both arms and began carrying him briskly forwards. Jack started to struggle at the indignity of it, and then realised it wasn't really worth it, it was just making him dizzier. Pitch's grip tightened at the struggles anyway, and Jack didn't think he'd win any kind of fight right now. Especially one where the outcome might end up with Pitch simply dropping him on the ground and walking away again.

The absurdity of the situation as well as Pitch's obvious distaste for what he was doing went from embarrassing to hilarious, and Jack started to laugh.

'Stop laughing!' Pitch hissed, but Jack couldn't stop. And then he really *couldn't* stop. The

laughing turned into hyperventilation, and as soon as they reached the shadows, Pitch put him down and propped him up against the cave wall, looking at him like he'd transformed into a gnome.

'Excellent, I've always wanted to deal with an hysterical frost spirit,' Pitch said, gritting his teeth in displeasure as Jack continued to hiccup on laughter while trying desperately to stop.

His gasping subsided into shuddery breaths and Jack stared up at Pitch, who looked like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

'You can go, you know. I *can* sleep here. You don't owe me anything. You did...you did save my life.'

'If you could just stop referring to it every five minutes, that would be *peachy*,' Pitch said. One of his hands twitched at his side. Jack wanted to say something, but instead he focused on taking deep breaths, on settling himself down.

Pitch waited until Jack seemed to have himself mostly under control again, and then without any preamble, he picked Jack up again. It suddenly occurred to Jack that Pitch could be taking him *anywhere*. A burst of fear expanded rapidly inside of him, and he frowned when Pitch noticed.

'Do you think I am going to hurt you?' Pitch said, nostrils flaring, picking up the strain of fear.

'I think you could,' Jack said, wary.

'Then you have your wits about you. Because I could. But for now, let's pretend that I won't.'

And then Jack was about to say that he wasn't sure he was up for teleporting, when Pitch teleported them both anyway.

Black rushing noise, a shrieking sound, like the air they were moving through was shredding around them. And then a copse of trees, the blurry form of his home, and no Mora, because enough time hadn't passed for her to have made it back there from riding the winds. Jack stared at the home even as he tumbled out of Pitch's arms and managed to catch himself in a semi-standing position with his staff.

Pitch started to laugh when he saw where Jack lived. It was not a friendly laugh.

'Oh, Jack! If only I had known *this* about you when I had all of my powers,' he crowed, waving his hand at the shack, 'you would have been so *easy*.'

'Hey! What's that supposed to mean?'

'The ability to weave and create all of that frost, and you made *that*?' Pitch looked at it again and continued to chuckle like he couldn't quite believe it.

Jack, insulted, looked at the three walled hunting cabin, patched up with snow and ice, and then shook his head. Pitch was right, of course. It was one of the reasons he didn't sleep in the house, and slept in trees instead. North made his glorious Workshop, Toothiana had her amazing sky castle, Bunny had his incredible network of underground warrens and Sandy...well, he didn't know what Sandy had, but he bet it was fantastic and probably made of sand. And he had a shack. A three-walled, patched together shack.

Pitch's eyes widened suddenly, and he walked towards the shack as though he'd seen something. He strode purposefully up a small hill, booted feet leaving deep impressions in the snow. He

walked inside the shack and behind the snow wall, looking around, and Jack wanted to follow, wanted to simply hop on the winds and glide easily, but instead he stayed standing in the same position, leaning against his staff, wondering why Pitch was even doing this.

‘You cannot convalesce here,’ Pitch called from the shack itself, and then emerged holding the untanned skin of a dead animal. ‘The Nain Rouge has been here, probably to finish the job.’

The Nain Rouge knows where I live?

Jack felt horror curl through him as he stared at the dun-coloured skin, gristle and blood still attached to it. Pitch threw it down in disgust, cleaned his hands off with some snow and looked around more warily, eyes scanning the treetops and the spaces in between the dark trunks. Jack realised that Pitch probably had better night vision than just about anyone he knew, so if anyone could spot something lurking in the shadows, it would probably be him.

He looked at the forest around them. Snow capping the branches of the trees, an excessive amount of icicles and frost patterns gleaming everywhere, the result of his boredom and curiosity. He wondered if the Nain Rouge was somewhere else in the world, creating her own frost patterns, making icicles. Or if she was actually out there looking for him right now, trying to find him so she could suck the rest of him dry.

Death by Nain Rouge does not have a nice ring to it.

He had no doubt, especially with how he felt now, that she could do it. She could probably kill him within minutes. He shuddered just imagining it. The last time he’d seriously worried about his life was when Pitch was threatening it. *How things have changed*, Jack thought, looking at him.

He stiffened when Pitch walked towards him rapidly, an old instinct to get ready for battle. And then he grimaced when he realised what Pitch had in mind.

‘I, look, I don’t think I’m up to teleporting again.’

‘You can’t stay here. It’s not safe, and this place is a hovel.’

‘Well, your place is a depressing, evil hole in the ground. Like I’m going to get better when the temperature is at volcano level.’

‘You may not get better at all.’

Jack raised himself on his staff and glared.

‘Oh, so now you want to talk about it? Now you’re not so bored that you’re willing to lower yourself to give it some time?’

‘I’m reluctant to take you back to North’s,’ Pitch said hesitantly. ‘That awful waterhorse was right. You are the only one out of the Guardians with a power that is directly desirable. It would be best if you went somewhere they were unlikely to follow you easily. The Nain Rouge is greedy and if she liked what she took, she’ll take the rest.’

‘Yeah, because what was it again?’ Jack said, upset. ‘Cold and dark go together so well?’

Pitch’s eyes narrowed.

‘I’ve been doing pretty well on my own for three hundred years,’ Jack said, at the end of his tether, ‘I can take care of myself.’

Jack tried to step back when Pitch thinned his lips and stepped forward anyway, catching Jack in his arms and holding him still. He looked down at him with his pale gold eyes and Jack waited for the fear to rise, waited for the eye-trick. But nothing happened. He looked up at Pitch uncertainly. His hands were *warm*, his grip was steady. The idea that they were about to go travelling through some wormhole of darkness again made him feel sick.

‘I’m serious,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t think I can do it again.’

The fingers around his arms tightened.

‘It’s this, or the Nain Rouge,’ Pitch said. ‘What a predicament you’ve found yourself in, caught between myself and that creature.’

‘Just,’ Jack said, staring up at Pitch, searching him for signs of goodness or heart or compassion or *anything*, and finding nothing except those hypnotic eyes and an unfathomable expression. ‘Just tell me what your name was, before the shadows.’

Pitch’s fingers flexed around him like he would like nothing more than to crush him out of existence. He looked to the side, considering.

‘Kozmotis, right?’ Jack said softly, and Pitch looked back at him, still and waiting. He looked trapped. Jack thought it strange, given that Pitch held the balance of power between them right now, even if he was without the shadows. ‘There was a you before...Pitch?’

Pitch looked down at his own robes, at the embroidery that would likely completely reclaim his robe within a couple of days. At the sword strap itself. And then he looked where his hands were bracing Jack on his upper arms and seemed to come to a kind of conclusion.

‘Kozmotis,’ he said quietly. ‘Kozmotis Pitchiner.’

The words were awkward, and Pitch looked like he had trouble even pushing them forward. They clearly disturbed him, and Jack wished he was more alert, wished he had more energy, because he wanted to talk about this. He had more questions. He opened his mouth to ask them, when Pitch’s grip tightened.

‘And before *you* all conquered the malevolent shadows and Nightmare Men and Fearlings, I – with an army behind me – did it too.’

Jack’s eyes widened in shock.

With that, they were away through the darkness once more. This time, instead of feeling like he was travelling through the darkness, he felt as though the darkness was travelling through him. It was awful and invasive. It reminded him too much of the Nain Rouge, her grip and her terrible stare with those solid red eyes and the cool blue life-force spiralling out of his body. He screamed out into the shadows. But the shadows stole his voice, and left him with the sensation of tumbling alone through the darkness.

He hit the ground of the new location with a solid thud, and immediately began to dry retch and then vomit, heaving up frost crystals and snowflakes. Pain racked through his body and his vision began to grey out. His staff had fallen from his hands and his head fell into the snow even as tears began to leak out of his eyes. He was alive, he was definitely alive, but he was beginning to wish that he’d passed out or something. Though, as heavy waves of dizziness moved through him, he began to think that wasn’t so far away after all.

Travelling through Bunny’s tunnels was fine, travelling through North’s portals was fine, but this

was something else entirely. Eventually the spasms of sickness passed him, and he collapsed on his side, curling up right there on the ground. He didn't care anymore. He was just so *done* with all of it.

He became aware of a gentle pressure between his upper back. It was a large hand rubbing small circles, and it could have been there the entire time. A warm presence sat behind him. It reminded him of something elusive, a tantalising memory that was so old, so long ago and so lost, that he hadn't even found it in the memories that Tooth had stored. A mother comforting him after a nightmare. The sense that everything would be okay. It was so jarring with his reality that it sent a thin line of pain through him, and he jerked at the reminder.

'I,' Jack started, and coughed out more sparkles of frost, 'I don't get it. Why are you being so nice to me?'

'I wish I knew,' Pitch said, and the hand moving in small circles on his back stopped, but did not withdraw. Jack had the strangest urge to push back into the hand, to encourage it to move again, but he resisted. 'Maybe I, too, remember Antarctica.'

Jack's eyes opened at that, but he was unable to think of a reply. Instead he took in the scene around him. A cold blue sky overhead, ice and solid rock beneath him. There were tall fir trees around them, capped with more snow than had been present at his home. And a little distance away, a three-storey house made of wood, huge and decorated ornately with carvings. He knew immediately that he was in Russia, with those carved eaves and the painted window frames. There was a level of care in the construction of the house itself which showed very fine craftsmanship.

He started to pull himself upright and Pitch helped him with a familiarity that reminded Jack that he'd spent too long the past day in varying states of weakness. He glanced at Pitch once, uncertain, but Pitch seemed just as uncomfortable as he did.

'Is this yours?' Jack managed, voice hoarse.

Pitch nodded as he looked at the house.

'I have a few like this. Towards the end I spent all my time down in the darkness and the caves, the Nightmare Men and Fearlings did better in the dark, and it suited my mood. But I have always known the value of having a few safe-houses.'

'We're in Russia?'

'Galich, Kostroma.'

'Oh, uh, that's nice, I- hey, wait a minute, what was that you said about defeating the shadows?'

Maybe Pitch would have answered, but the wave of dizziness that struck Jack was huge, overwhelming. His world tilted sideways, and his vision greyed out rapidly, and then his awareness was sucked into the dark. This time, however, he wasn't teleporting. He'd simply passed out.

*

He woke up slowly. He was in a bed, but the room was cold and the chill from outside penetrated pleasantly. It was dark in the room, and there was a light sheet resting over him, but no blankets. That was when he realised he was lying down on a soft mattress, with a pillow under his head. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in a bed. He was oddly surprised to have woken up nightmare free, given that most of his sleep these days was filled with Mora's fear-inspiring nightmares, and that Pitch had been the last person that he'd seen.

He still felt a little sore, but overall, much, much better than before. His breath hitched when he realised that the emptiness, the sucked out power, it was still gone. Sleep and exposure to frost had not replenished it. That meant – Jack guessed – that it probably was permanent. He sighed heavily, a hand coming up to rub at his chest where he felt the missing ache most intensely.

He reached out blindly in the dark for his staff and his hand clattered into it, leaning beside a chest of drawers that his hand *thunked* against in the dark. He was surprised. Pitch had been the one who put him to bed, because really, who else would have done it? And once more he'd left the staff alone. It was bewildering. Try as he might, he couldn't think of Pitch as a Kozmotis, it just seemed too strange.

'Feeling better?' Pitch's voice came softly from deep within the shadows, and Jack jumped in surprise as he saw Pitch's eyes open and glow from the outline of a chair.

'Holy shit!' Jack exclaimed. 'Creepy much? Just sitting there in the dark? I thought you were supposed to be different now.'

'I am different now,' Pitch murmured, not rising. 'Do you feel better?'

'I, yeah, I guess,' Jack said, wonderingly. 'But the life-force thingie, that's still gone. It hasn't come back. Uh, how long was I out for?'

'Two days.'

'Two *days*?' Jack slid his legs out of the bed and then stood up. He had some of his former bounce back. Whatever the sleep did, it was helpful. 'I need to get back to North, I can't believe two days have passed.'

Jack paused and stared hard at Pitch. 'Is it my imagination, or did you say something about having conquered the shadows before I passed ou- *Mora*?'

Red eyes in the darkness stepped forwards and Mora appeared in a shaft of dim light pouring in from the window. She gleamed, and her ears pricked forward in excitement.

'Mora!' he cried, and stepped forwards to grasp her hot, sandpapery head in his hands. She whickered at him, nudged his chest over and over again with her nose. Fear built in him, as it always did when she was close, but with renewed energy he could ride it out, and it was nothing more than a mild inconvenience. The fear prickled through him and left him feeling mildly exhilarated. With the combination of actually feeling energised and Mora being there, he felt closer to his old self than he had in a while. He looked over when Pitch stood up.

'Has anyone ever told you that you have the concentration span of a gnat?' Pitch was looking the space where Jack's hands connected with Mora's cheeks with an odd intensity. Jack looked at his own hands to see if he was doing anything wrong, but he wasn't. He stumbled backwards when Mora pushed at him with her forehead, and then he began to scratch her behind the ears. She lipped him happily, snuffling at his hoodie. When he looked back up, Pitch was looking at Jack instead, an odd expression on his face.

'The fear doesn't bother you?' he said, intent, and Jack shrugged.

'I know she's causing it, so I guess not? I mean, come on, there's only so much fun you can have before some of it gets scary! Sled rides, tobogganing down the side of a hill and not knowing if you'll have a broken leg or just a great story by the end of it. Think about bungee jumping and roller coaster rides and first dates and snowball fights and white water rafting and the first time you

go up in a balloon!’

Jack got excited just thinking about all of it, grinning at Pitch. Mora sensed his mood and stepped back from him, turned in a circle and jumped up on the winds. Jack did the same a moment later, and didn’t even think about how he was actually able to do that now until he was already outside and circling Mora under the stars, laughing and shooting spirals and lines of frost from his staff.

They raced around each other, Mora’s shrill whinnying punctuating Jack’s intent, joyful experiments with his frost. His life-force may have been depleted but at high energy, he could ride the winds just fine, he could still make frost and frost animals, snow and ice. He fringed the side of Pitch’s house with huge frost curlicues and then rose up into the sky where he could generate enough frost in the cold air to create diamond dust. In the sparkling, refractive light, all the colours of the rainbow shone. Mora ducked and weaved amongst it all, playing with the frost herself, wearing some of it on her mane, pawing at it in the sky.

Mora shot off down to the ground when Pitch came outside, and Jack followed, sailing down and landing roughly. He stumbled a couple of steps before getting his equilibrium back. He realised he’d probably have to relearn how to judge dismounting, with some of his inner frost being gone.

Pitch traced an absent hand over Mora’s neck as she nuzzled against him, and Jack watch the two of them curiously. They had an easy affection.

‘If you’re different now, doesn’t the fear affect you too?’ he asked. Pitch looked down at Mora and she tilted her head up at him.

‘Not in the way it affects humans,’ Pitch said, after considering the question. ‘Where I come from, warriors were taught to embrace fear. We had a saying, if you will: To conquer fear, you must become fear. Grim, I suppose, but effective.’

‘Is that how you learned to do that eye-trick thing? You learned that *before*?’

‘What warrior doesn’t wish to inspire fear in his enemies? What warrior would not benefit from knowing when another soldier lies to him, by seeing his fears? That is one of the few skills I retained.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, tracing curling lines in the snow and wondering how far he could push Pitch for answers. ‘About this whole ‘before’ thing... who are you, anyway?’

There was a silence that stretched, strangely comfortable under the watchful stars. Jack looked at his handiwork on the side of the three storey house and decided he could improve upon it later. If there was going to be a later.

Pitch walked back to the wide veranda and sat down on the steps, picking up a part of his robe and looking down at the embroidery on it. Mora walked over, and Jack followed. He thought it would be weird to stand there, looking down at Pitch, so instead he sat down on the snow in front of him, wriggling it between his toes in anticipation. Pitch traced the embroidery with a single, long finger, and there was something wistful about the motion, a rawness that Jack hadn’t expected. It made him want to move closer.

‘Forgive me,’ Pitch said, and the words sounded like they were intended for far more than Jack or Mora, that he had almost forgotten that they were there. And then he looked up, made eye contact and frowned thoughtfully. ‘This is a very old story. How do you folks begin? Ah, yes, that’s it. Well, once upon a time, there was a race of people and within that, a warrior-folk who knew their duty almost from the moment they were born. It’s where the golden eyes come from,’ Pitch said,

flashing his own bright, pyrite gaze. 'Uncommon here, uncommon there too. A sign, if you will, of a *destiny*. It was a Golden Age, and we were Golden Warriors, chartered to protect the Tsars and Tsarinas of the Constellations.'

Pitch waved his hands up towards the sky, and followed the direction of his own fingers to look up at the stars. Jack could not believe what he was hearing. He looked up at the stars too. It had never occurred to him that Pitch might be from space.

'My purview was the greatest of all the monarchies, ruled by the Tsar and Tsarina Lunanoff. They were noble, fair and firm. And they were under great threat from the Shadows and the Nightmare Men; sentient, insatiable forces that devoured and destroyed the souls of others. You know – quite well, actually – the son of the Tsar and Tsarina. One Man in the Moon,' Pitch said, with a smirk.

Jack scoffed, he couldn't help it.

'Are you saying the Man in the Moon is some royal alien? That you're an alien?'

'That's a bit of a *crude* way to put it,' Pitch said, looking affronted, 'but-'

'Are you telling me that you're some kind of grand warrior from *space*?' Jack laughed, helpless. 'You realise what that sounds like, right?'

Pitch bristled and then he simply rolled his eyes.

'Do you want to hear this story, or not?'

'Fine,' Jack muttered, trying to imagine what the world would look like if Pitch's stories were true. Warriors and monarchies in space, up there in the constellations of the sky. Not just a whole world out there, but a whole universe of worlds. It defied imagination, and that was saying something, he'd seen a lot in the last few hundred years.

'Sandy would never tell you, mostly because he *can't*, but he too did not come from this world you all call your home. He once belonged to the stars.'

Jack looked at the embroidery on Pitch's robe. Even as he spoke about his history, the shadows drew back, revealing more and more of it. And suddenly Jack realised what he was looking at. At the hem, there was an indication through stylised gold embroidery of the curves of planets, populated by people and cities. Some of the curls and ornate lines were an alphabet he'd never seen and couldn't read. And rising above the decorations at the bottom of the robe, constellations were chased with more of the unreadable alphabet. If Pitch was lying, it was an elaborate lie.

'How did you end up here?' Jack said, realising that it might actually all be true.

'That is a long story, but to cut it very short, I captured and imprisoned the living shadows with the help of an army of Golden Warriors. But someone had to stand watch, and so...I did.' Pitch paused for a long moment, looking away into nothing. His brows pinched together suddenly, in pain, and he took a shallow breath. 'I failed and was defeated and then possessed by the shadows. The downside, apparently, to our Golden Warrior's training is that – perhaps ironically now that I think of it – we were peculiarly susceptible to that form of possession.'

'Twisted with the motives of the shadows themselves, and with an army of darkness behind me, I defeated many of the monarchies I had sworn to protect. I became feared and reviled and transformed friends and warriors into Nightmare Men. Children became Fearlings. Whatever warrior's training I remembered, I used it to hurt and betray. And it was in my determination to chase the moon clipper and destroy the Lunanoffs once and for all that I ended up crashing in this

godforsaken place, bound by gravity and my ship destroyed beyond repair.'

Pitch gave a resigned smile.

'And here I've been ever since.'

Jack stared at him with eyes so wide that they started to hurt. He remembered to close his mouth. Suddenly a thought occurred to him.

'And Bunny knew this? And he never told me?'

Pitch shrugged, he didn't appear to care what Bunnymund had told or not told Jack. He cleared his throat and then looked down at his hands.

'The living shadows became restless down there in the dark after I was imprisoned. They have wants and needs. To grow, to devour, to create destruction. And imprisoned in the caves, who knows who they called out to? But someone answered, and they have what they want again. They will be hard to defeat.'

'Oh, shit, that reminds me, I should go see North. I told him I'd come back in a day or two and I haven't. He's probably worried.'

But Jack didn't move. He sat there, processing everything he'd been told. Pitch stood up and walked past Jack to look at the sky again, scanning the same stars that were embroidered into his robe.

'The Guardians are the charges of the Man in the Moon, the new Tsar Lunanoff,' Pitch said, looking up at the crescent moon. Suddenly he turned on Jack with a sour look on his face. 'It seems just my *luck*, that you, being vulnerable and *stupid* enough to get injured, has triggered an old instinct in me. A very old instinct. One I thought I had forgotten.' He looked back up at the moon again. 'I can't say I'm grateful to have it back.'

'Because it's so bad to be good?' Jack said slowly, confused. Pitch ignored him, he didn't seem inclined to speak anymore. Jack got the feeling that there was more to the story. He wondered what it felt like, to have gone from Golden Warrior, to possessed monster, and then some new being, disturbed by shadows and hundreds, if not thousands of years away from his past and his world. He wondered what it must have felt like, to have vanquished and destroyed the people he would have once considered friends and companions and colleagues.

Jack looked down at his own hands sitting in the snow and thought that the guilt alone would probably be enough to crush someone. A small sliver of fear wound its way down from his heart into the rest of his body. He didn't want to feel...whatever he was feeling for Pitch. Empathy? Care? Concern? He didn't want to look at Pitch and give a crap about what he felt. His fear grew, expanded, and instantly he realised that Pitch would sense it if it got much stronger. He tried to distract himself by thinking of other things. But Pitch had already turned to look at him, like he was some entirely new being himself. Pitch looked at him like he was the one who had told some unbelievable story.

'I just, I just can't wrap my head around it,' Jack said. And then he realised that he could. That he was. That on top of all of the weirdness that had been happening lately, this seemed like it wasn't so radical. It would explain a lot. He rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his palm. So much had changed in such a small amount of time, he barely felt able to process it all. And in the middle of it all, his own whirling loss. Jamie, some of his powers, his sister, the threat of the Nain Rouge.

Just thinking about the Nain Rouge again made him shiver. Mora rose and approached him, head down and cautious. He realised that she was probably hungry, probably needing some more fear. It was a strange relationship they had, but he didn't mind. She walked closer until finally her head was so close to him he could almost lean into it. His fear of the Nain Rouge spiked, and he took a deep and studied inhale. Absently, he reached out and trailed fingers down the side of her face. She didn't jerk away when frost patterns followed, tiny and intricate, chasing their way around her cheek and fringing her eye.

Pitch walked closer and sat down in the cold in front of them both.

'She inspires fear, and feeds off your fear, and yet you still have fun together.'

'Jealous?' Jack said mocking, absent. And then he realised that feasibly, Pitch probably was jealous. That, actually, he probably shouldn't be taunting him about something like friendship or companionship. It would explain why Pitch couldn't seem to look away every time Jack touched Mora or tried to be close to her.

Pitch's expression had shut down, closed off. There was something like the old Pitch about him now, dangerous and unpredictable.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said instantly, 'I didn't-'

'It's nothing,' Pitch said, dark.

Jack suddenly realised that here he was, sitting with the former Nightmare King in the middle of Russia, outside of his awesome house, with one of the few remnant Nightmares. He smiled and shook his head.

'I'm meant to be guarding fun, and instead here I am,' he said, ruefully.

Pitch fake stretched and offered a sharp-toothed smirk.

'Oh, well, if you want to compare war stories, I was meant to be guarding the worst peril the Lunanoffs had ever seen, and instead, I *became* it. And here I am.'

Jack laughed.

'Why are you being so nice to me, anyway?'

'Didn't you hear me, Jack?' Pitch said, pressing his fingers down into the snow and compacting it. 'An old instinct has been awakened. I was born with the golden eyes, I knew my duty before I could talk. Destined to *protect* and *defend* the great Lunanoffs and their charges,' Pitch spread his arms melodramatically wide and then brought his arms in and pointed at Jack, his experience sobering with sudden distaste, 'and who has the Man in the Moon *personally* chosen as his charges, Jack?'

Jack stared at him as it dawned upon him. He stared at the finger pointing directly at him and then looked up at the moon.

'The Guardians,' he whispered.

'Correct,' Pitch said, an almost angry expression on his face.

'You,' Jack said, 'but...you tried to destroy us?'

‘So you can see why I feel this is a bit of a quandary then,’ Pitch said, looking up at the Man in the Moon as though he’d like nothing more than to yank him down to their level and shake him hard.

‘You feel like you have to protect and defend *us*?’ Jack had to hear it out loud, because there was no way he’d believe it otherwise. Pitch glared, and Jack huffed out a sound of shock.

As Pitch continued to maintain the eye contact, Jack suddenly felt afraid, and then terrified. *The eye-trick*, he thought with dismay, trying to tear his eyes away and unable. He realised that Pitch was not resigned to his fate, he was *furiously* with it. And then he had no more time for logic and sentences, as they were chased away by a thundering fear, building so that his toes curled and his fingers clenched and his lungs felt like they were collapsing. It continued to grow until Jack began to shake uncontrollably, until weariness chased away his newfound energy.

Just as suddenly, Pitch released him from the grip of terror without even blinking. Jack gasped over and over again, and stared at Pitch, hurt.

‘Make no mistake, Jack,’ Pitch said darkly, standing up and brushing snow off himself. ‘It might be written in my blood to protect those who the Lunanoffs desire me to protect, but I don’t have to like it. And trust me. I don’t.’

And with that, he walked away back into his house, Mora following behind obediently.

Locket

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments / kudos / bookmarks! I'm personally happy to finally be writing some 'comfort' in the 'hurt/comfort' part of this story (there will be more!); hope you are as well.

Jack, bewildered and shaky, stood up and stared at the door that Pitch had left open. He had half-expected it to be slammed shut. Jack wasn't locked out, but he wasn't invited in, either. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and stared up at the crescent moon.

'Well, is it true, Moon? Are you some Tsar?'

He didn't expect an answer and he didn't get one. He felt sad, looking up at the satellite, realising that it may have been many things, but in the otherworld from which Pitch came, it was also a ship, and one that was stuck orbiting a small planet. Jack raised a trembling hand to his chest to remind himself that he was still there, still present. It didn't seem possible that the power that resurrected him came from an orphan.

A light went on in a room in the uppermost storey of the house. It was candlelight, Jack figured, from the way it guttered and flickered for a moment before evening out. Jack walked up the wooden steps towards the open door hesitantly. He wasn't willing to take the winds to North's just yet, and Pitch's eye-trick had been draining. He decided he'd catch a short nap, and then leave. He made his way through the dark lower floor back towards the room he'd exited. He didn't have night vision like Pitch, especially away from the light of the stars, so he reached out with his staff and hand to make sure he didn't catch himself on anything.

Mora was already there, waiting for him.

'Hey girl,' he said, 'hopefully he won't mind me just catching up on some Z's, what do you reckon?'

She tossed her head once, which didn't really indicate anything except that she'd heard him.

He sat down on the side of the bed and looked at her outline in relief. He remembered how scared he'd been when the Nain Rouge had threatened her. He wished that he didn't have to hide his friendship with her from the other Guardians. He wished that they would understand that the world wasn't as black and white as they sometimes made it out to be.

He held out his hand to her and she stepped forwards primly, before pushing her nose towards his hand, stopping just shy of touching him.

'It's okay, girl,' he said, offering her a bright smile, 'you must be a bit hungry after everything that happened to you too. Come on.'

Mora closed the distance between them and pushed her warm, sandy nose into the palm of his hand. Jack took a deep, measured breath and smiled through the fear, scratching at her chin and rubbing the bridge of her nose.

‘That was scary, huh? With the Nain Rouge? I’m glad she didn’t get you.’

Jack watched as she closed her glowing eyes and leaned into his hand. He hadn’t had a lot of time to think about Jamie since Mora had lead him to Pitch and the Unseelie Court had started their villainy, but it lurked in the background, a constant reminder that something, *someone* was missing and they weren’t coming back.

He gave Mora one last cheek rub before getting up and opening the window to let the cool air in. He used it to create frost patterns along the bedside drawers, and even across Mora’s flank, which she never minded.

He got back into the bed and folded his hands over his chest. Mora stepped into the shadows and shifted her hips and then lowered her head, relaxing. He wondered how he would feel if he was asked to protect the people he’d hated, the people who had imprisoned him. Jack decided that it must feel pretty shitty to be bound to people by a link that was physical, and could not be controlled. Jack stared up at the dark ceiling and wondered what Pitch was doing up on the third floor, and he if knew or cared that Jack had walked back inside and was lying down again.

Even after everything, he felt a pull towards Pitch. Maybe it was that Pitch had seen him vulnerable and that, despite his occasional taunts, he had mostly dealt with it with calm and competence. Maybe it was that they both knew what it was like to be invisible. Maybe it was that Pitch didn’t seem weak even though he’d lost the shadows, or maybe Jack was just a sucker for an underdog, having felt like one himself for so long.

Jack rubbed at the front of his neck as he started to drift off. It was sore and the skin felt damaged. It still bothered him, the constant reminder of what the Nain Rouge had done. He hoped the marks healed soon.

Sleep came quickly, and the nightmare that followed in its wake came with stretching claws.

None of Mora’s nightmares were ever pleasant, but this started out in a place that left Jack more off centre than usual. He stood in North’s workshop and all the other Guardians were there, the elves, the yeti. And at first they’d noticed him, talked to him, even though it was clear they found him a nuisance. And then, one by one, they forgot Jack, began to walk through him. Jack kept touching his arms, his torso as they each caused that horrible, unfathomable coldness to rise inside of him.

To lose their belief was heartbreaking. First the elves and the yeti, then Bunnymund, then Sandy, and finally Toothiana and North. They all talked happily about how it had been an unusually mild winter that year, how they were enjoying it, how they couldn’t remember why exactly, but they’d always hated too much cold, and even North laughed and pointed to the fireplace roaring in the hearth and made some comment about how he thought it was important to bring warmth into the cold places in the land. And then they all walked off, laughing amongst each other, as companionable as they had ever been before Jack had joined their ranks.

He watched them go, a hand fisted up at his own heart, feeling too stripped of his defences to even ask them to come back, to believe in him. After hundreds of years, he knew the answer. It stole the breath from his lungs and left him empty. He could not survive it again. He *couldn’t*. He spent years, *decades*, not being believed in, coming to no longer believe in himself. He spent *centuries* with only the most fragile of connections to others.

In the nightmare he wandered off, already lost in tears and desperation, wondering how he would ever go about convincing himself that he could survive it again, especially now that he knew what he was missing.

The setting changed, he walked through the Arctic Circle during its period of endless night. Relentless winds excoriated the landscape and icebergs cast black shadows without the presence of the sun.

The Nain Rouge materialised up out of the roaring winds and grinned pointed, rotting teeth at him. Her eyes did not glint in the light. They were the eyes of a dead thing.

‘Boo!’ she said happily, as he froze in terror. His instincts returned quickly and he jumped on the winds to flee, but she reached out with nightmare strength and pulled him back with a bolt of frost; tipping him off the winds with his own power. He tried to crawl away, and she grabbed the back of his hoodie and dragged him up and then spun him around, inhumanly strong. His mind blanked with fear.

‘First, let’s get rid of this,’ she said, breaking his staff in one hand and tossing it out of sight. ‘And now, let’s rid of *this!*’

She plunged her hand deep into Jack’s flesh, punching through his sternum. He screamed himself hoarse as she twisted fingers around his heart and began pulling more of his frost into herself again. It was the worst pain he’d ever felt, and he arched away from it, his fingers and toes splaying so hard that his hands and feet cramped. He had a moment to wish that someone would come and rescue him, that someone would find him out here in the bleakness at the edge of the world; but then he remembered there was no one. No one who still remembered him.

His mind splintered under the weight of the horror he felt, and there was only pain, and darkness, and the certainty that death was coming, and *it could not come soon enough*.

‘*Mora!*’ A hard shout penetrated a little way into his consciousness and echoed around his mind, but he was lost to the terror of knowing he was going to die, and *soon*, and there would be no one there fighting on his side, no North brandishing his sabres, no Bunnymund willing to ditch a boomerang. He could not remember what the word Mora meant, and why it might be important.

He began to shake violently. It rattled him into a strange focus, and he emerged from the dream with an incoherent cry. His whole body raced with fear and pain. A hand fisted in the material of his hoodie, shaking him. Hooves stamped and pawed at the ground in frustration nearby. None of the details resolved into anything that made sense. Jack was certain there was a hand around his heart, that his sternum was split open for all to see inside.

‘Mora, darling, I know you’re hungry, but get back please. Get back. Let go of him!’

Mora, his Nightmare, Jack remembered. And then his mind helpfully supplied him with a name: Pitch.

Jack realised it was Pitch who had his hand fisted into his hoodie and became suddenly terrified that *Pitch* was trying to remove his power. Confused, he forgot about the Nain Rouge and was sure that Pitch was the one who had fingers splayed in the bloody mess of his heart. He choked as certainty swelled inside of him and he tried to claw Pitch’s hand off him, sending frost and icicles spinning out of his palms without even thinking about it.

Pitch turned back with wide, frightened eyes that glowed in the night.

‘No, Jack, wait,’ he pleaded, wincing as Jack scratched hard at him. He let go of the hoodie and held up both of his hands in a sign of surrender. ‘Easy. Come on now. Easy now. It was just a nightmare. You are in Kostroma in Russia, there’s no one else here except myself and Mora, I promise you. Easy now. Settle,’ he said, a look of appeal on his face.

He dropped to his knees beside the bed, making his presence less threatening. With a slow and gentle sureness, he reached out for Jack's hand and grasped it in his own, folding cold fingers through his warm ones. Jack's other hand was still clawing at his chest, as though checking that everything was in place, that it wasn't ripped open.

'I wouldn't do that to you,' Pitch said, reading Jack's fear as though it was broadcasting through the room at loud volume. 'You *know* that. I didn't even try when I was the Nightmare King, did I? Come on now, *breathe*.'

Jack breathed in and shook it out, trembling uncontrollably, tears streaming down his face. He wiped them away with his free hand, but they just kept coming. A wave of confusion moved through him and he tried to jerk his hand away, but Pitch wouldn't let go. Jack swallowed down a sob, took another shaking breath.

'You, you don't even want to be doing this. You said so,' Jack accused, bitter. Pitch took a deep breath from the side of the bed. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his other hand and shook his head once.

'Do you really think anything could be so simple?' Pitch said, and then his hand squeezed at Jack's so quickly it seemed an unconscious gesture.

'You need this,' Pitch said, 'Mora took too much from you without realising. The nightmare was not...normal. You won't settle down well on your own,' he said, and Jack jerked because imagining trying to settle down on his own only reminded him of how alone he'd been in the dream. All the Guardians had forgotten him and none of them had even *liked* winter or the cold and then the Nain Rouge had...

'Jack,' Pitch said, persistent, 'listen to me, focus on *me*.'

Jack wanted to, but he couldn't forget that Pitch only felt like doing this because of some ancient instinct that he didn't even want. As far as he knew, Pitch was loathing every second of it. His chest hurt, he felt like he'd been put through a blender. Maybe Pitch *had* been taking his life force, he certainly felt bad enough that it could be true. He tried to tug his hand away and Pitch let him, but immediately reached out and put warm fingers on his forehead instead.

Jack listed into the hand before he could stop himself, his body desperate for reassurance regardless of whether it was real or not. And he squeezed his eyes shut, embarrassed, because he didn't have the energy to even begin to try pulling himself together.

Pitch's fingers spread slowly through his hair, over his scalp. The points of contact were so real, so present, that for a brief, intense moment, Jack wanted to pull Pitch onto the bed and just hold onto someone who was alive and could see him. But the desperation he felt for contact was too much, too big, and he hated himself, he was supposed to be stronger than this, and Pitch would realise how pathetic he was and he'd-

'*Jack*,' Pitch said, loudly, 'this is still Mora, still her influence, I promise you. I want you to look at me, *please*.'

Jack opened his eyes and stared at Pitch through the blur of tears, and Pitch shook his head with some strong feeling that Jack couldn't place.

'Oh, she got you good, I'm afraid,' Pitch said, threading fingers through Jack's hair like he'd done it before, like it was easy. Jack blinked rapidly to clear his eyes and stared at Pitch, confused, adrift and nauseous.

'N-nothing like that has, has ever happened to me before,' Jack said, stumbling over his words.

'It was a feeding frenzy,' Pitch explained, tilting his head to one side and looking towards the corner of the room where Mora stood. As he looked at her, his fingers moved unconsciously over Jack's head, and he shivered in response. 'The encounter she had with the Nain Rouge was not only stressful for you. In saving her life, you threatened you own. She is attached to you, she prefers to feed on *your* fear above all else, and your life being threatened put her in a precarious position. She was already hungry, and lost her way through the maze of your fear. It may sound strange, but Nightmares fear things too. It makes them dangerous when they're feeding.'

'Aren't you loving this?' Jack said, beginning to calm at the explanation. 'I thought you loved suffering.'

'I love *fear*,' Pitch said, staring at Jack and grimacing. 'And I've had plenty tonight. You manufacture it in abundance.' Jack started to pull away, feeling like he was being disapproved of.

Great, now I can't even get fear right.

Pitch curled his fingers reassuringly in Jack's hair, so that he felt powerless to move. So many nights, so many nights of not having anyone, and he couldn't summon the will to move away.

'I only meant that sometimes there can be too much of a good thing.' Pitch offered a smirk as a kind of olive branch and Jack couldn't help but respond with a small, ruined laugh.

He closed his eyes as Pitch continued to touch his hair with gentle, sensitive fingers. It seemed like Pitch didn't want to stop. It went against all of Jack's assumptions about Pitch hating offering support of any kind. Maybe Pitch was right; it wasn't that simple. There was something in the way he touched Jack that was unexpectedly tender and attentive. He felt like he was being noticed by someone, being seen, and he didn't want the confusion, he didn't want the obligation of questioning why, and who, and where it was coming from.

Jack leaned into the hand and allowed a cautious relief as the fear began to drain away properly. It made him suddenly lax. He hadn't realised how tense he'd still been.

'There we go,' Pitch whispered, approvingly.

'You don't hate this, do you?' Jack whispered back. 'The whole...your hand in my hair.'

'What normally happens after a child wakes up from a nightmare?' Pitch said, wistfully. 'They get comforted, if they are lucky enough. And I know you are no child, and that I am no parent, but fear has a better taste to it if it can be soothed away.'

Pitch paused and hesitated, as though weighing his next words.

'And...some of the contents of your nightmare were not unfamiliar to me,' he said, haltingly. 'You are not the only one who fears being forgotten, as you'll probably remember. And...you are not the only one who could do with some proximity.'

'Oh,' Jack said, thinking about how he'd felt when all of the Guardians had forgotten him. He remembered the coldness as they walked through him, even North, who had been the first Guardian to really talk to him as an adult, to relate to him as an equal. He shuddered, tensed when he realised that he had no way of proving that they could see him until he actually saw them again. It filled him with a strange dread.

Pitch made a dissatisfied sound in his throat and then removed his hand. Jack's eyes flew open in

shock, but Pitch was only standing so that he could sit on the side of the bed instead. He immediately returned his hand, and the better angle meant that he could fit Jack's cheek into the palm of his hand while his fingers moved through the white strands that he could reach.

It felt...good, Jack realised. It was nice.

'Should I stop?' Pitch asked, and Jack shook his head, staring up at Pitch like he was some kind of revelation.

'This is all *really* confusing,' Jack said, and Pitch laughed a breath of air out through his nose.

'You don't say.'

'What you said earlier, about not wanting to protect and defend us. Why is this different?'

Pitch stared off into a space above Jack's forehead for a little while. And then he turned his gaze to Jack's and raised his brows in question.

'Why did *you* keep coming back after Mora lead you to me? Why did you even enter the home of your *enemy* in the first place? And then why keep coming back to visit me the way you did?'

Jack swallowed and he moved his hand to his throat at the pain. He must have been screaming out loud during the nightmare, because it felt like he'd scratched up the inside of his throat. He wondered how long Pitch had been trying to wake him before he'd actually woken up. He wondered how he would have fared if Pitch hadn't been there at all. He trembled, and made himself focus on Pitch's questions instead.

'I felt...' Jack began and then made a noise of frustration. 'I don't know. I don't know what I felt, okay? I just didn't like the idea of you being stuck down there, alone. I didn't like it at the time, when it first happened decades ago,' he admitted, embarrassed. He was sure that Pitch could see his cheeks flush, even through all the darkness. 'I told myself it was okay because you know, you were evil, and you were trying to hurt children. But, you know, I sat in on some university lectures for a couple of years and you know what they say about loneliness?'

'What do *they* say?' Pitch said, staring at Jack like he was unable to look away.

'They say that it kills people. That solitary confinement in a prison is like torture. It's, it's a human rights issue. You know, putting someone in jail so they can't interact with anyone, that's torture. And so it just...'

Jack paused as he realised that maybe he was being too vulnerable, too open. Maybe he was sharing too much of himself in the moment. This would all be so easy for Pitch to use against him. All of it. And if Pitch ever did get those shadows back, if he ever did become evil again, he was just handing himself up on a silver platter.

'Jack,' Pitch breathed, 'it just what?'

'I thought about you, okay?' Jack said, defensive. 'I thought about you sometimes. I know it's stupid. I didn't visit until Mora lead me to your home that first time, but sometimes I thought about Antarctica. I mean, not the whole betrayal and you snapping my staff and stuff, but I thought about how you just...'

'Just what?' Pitch said, a hint of desperation entering his voice. His fingers against the side of Jack's head pressed firmly, insistently.

‘I didn’t want to identify with you, I *really* didn’t, okay?’ Jack said, looking sideways into the darkness, finding the glare of Mora’s red eyes and tensing again, ‘I couldn’t help it. I did. I came back because, because you seemed different. Because I was worried. At first that you were like, that you’d sent your shadows out to do something horrible and were just *pretending* to be different, and then because you *weren’t* doing that and I just wanted to know why. And I didn’t think, I didn’t think anyone deserved solitary confinement. How could I? It took me twenty or thirty years to even meet a *spirit* who could see me, and by then...’ Jack trailed off, he didn’t like to think about those early years, when he had simply assumed that no one would ever be able to see him, ever again.

Pitch stretched his fingers through the whole of Jack’s scalp, and Jack’s eyes sank shut at the delightful spread of sensation. It was wonderful, it sent tingling down the back of his neck, all the way through his shoulders and back. It had been so long since anyone had touched him like this, had offered him prolonged, physical comfort. It made him hyperaware of Pitch, his hand, the way the warm palm pressed against his cold cheek, the way fingertips scratched at his scalp without hurting, simply creating more sensory feedback.

‘Thank you,’ Pitch said, and Jack managed to open his eyes. They looked at each other for a long moment, and then it became uncomfortable for both of them. Pitch moved his hand at the same time Jack opened his mouth to say that he was feeling better.

But Pitch didn’t stand up and leave, and Jack didn’t want him to. They stayed there like that, side by side for a little while. Jack yawned, looked over at Mora.

‘Will she do that again?’ Jack said, feeling a strange mix of fear and concern; wondering – even now – if she was okay. He knew she must have felt pretty bad to do something like that in the first place. And even now she cowered in the corner, as though aware and ashamed of what she’d done.

Pitch beckoned her forward with a finger and she stepped forward slowly, placing each hoof one in front of the other warily. Finally she reached Pitch and pushed her head into his arm, body sagging a little.

‘She was frightened for you,’ Pitch said, translating whatever he could read from her. ‘She thought you were dead, when the Nain Rouge attacked you.’

Jack shivered. He’d thought exactly the same thing, and the dream had been even worse. The Nain Rouge had been so strong, and her hand had been inside of his chest, inside his body, twisting around causing pain even while she had grinned maniacally at him. And she had been at his shack, looking for him, looking to take the rest. That had not been a nightmare, that had been real. He began to take shallow breaths, remembering how he had wished for death at the end, and that no one had been there, no one had-

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, in mild exasperation, sensing the rise of his fear, ‘honestly, I know-’

‘No, you don’t know!’ Jack said suddenly, sitting up angrily and startling Mora backwards. ‘You *don’t* know, okay? Just like I don’t know what it was like to be possessed by shadows! She didn’t take your life force, she took shadows and demons from you. She *exorcised* you when you couldn’t do it yourself!’

Pitch’s eyes widened and he stilled. He looked like he’d been slapped.

‘You think I didn’t try?’ he said, silkily.

‘What?’ Jack said.

‘You think that I did not try to remove them myself?’

‘I don’t know,’ Jack said, ‘did you?’

‘You seem to have brightened up a great deal. I’ll take Mora with me and you can finish sleeping,’ Pitch said, changing the subject as he stood up and reached out for Mora.

‘What? No, I didn’t-’ Jack said, and Pitch walked out of the room.

Jack stumbled out of bed and followed him, angry.

‘You can’t keep doing this!’ he said. ‘You can’t keep storming away just because someone says the wrong thing to you. I’m going to say the wrong thing, Pitch, I know hardly anything about you!’

Pitch paused in the hallway, and then turned to look over his shoulder at Jack.

‘I had simply presumed you didn’t want to know,’ Pitch said, and then walked away through the hallway without a second glance. A moment later Jack heard the sound of him moving quickly up some stairs and his own head bowed. He stared at the dim outline of floorboards and his hand curled on the doorframe.

‘Maybe I do,’ he whispered.

*

Jack woke with a gasp from deep, dreamless sleep. He flew out of bed into the air and called his staff to him with the help of the wind. His life-force was unreplenished, but he felt energised again, he felt good.

The events of the night came back in a rush. Pitch’s story about the Constellations and the Tsar and Tsarina Lunanoff and being a Golden Warrior by a different name, the horrid nightmare caused by Mora, followed by a warm, comforting hand moving through his hair. Jack turned in a slow circle and then settled slowly on the floor. He looked around the room curiously. Mora was absent, he wondered if Pitch still had her with him.

In the light of day, he found himself in a tastefully decorated guestroom. There was a fabric wall-hanging of a field of poppies. The bedside cabinet had a full glass of (frozen) water on it, and a small, ornamental bowl with a single apple in it. The bed coverlet had been folded at the foot of the bed, and was woven with black, gold and red threads in a tasteful design. In one corner was the heavy armchair that Pitch had been brooding in the night before, and in the other corner, an imposing wardrobe with metal handles and clawed feet.

He looked under the bed and it was clean. He looked in the first bedside drawer and found an empty, unlined journal with a red leather cover. The second drawer contained a fountain pen but no ink. The third drawer down was packed, disturbingly, with bullets. Jack opened the wardrobe, which creaked painfully. There were wooden coat hangers each painted with a poppy motif, and hanging from two were dated woollen tunics. It was clothing from a bygone age, perfectly preserved with the magic that had kept the house whole during all the time that had passed.

Jack floated out of the room and into another, curious to learn more about a Pitch who seemed to be a bit of a packrat, who liked the colour red, as well as gold and black, and who enjoyed geometric designs. Even the light fixtures were wooden. Instead of chandeliers or glass or plastic, light-globes were covered with thin, carved wooden shades. He learned that Pitch felt obligated to put a rug on every floor in every room, and that he preferred dark woods over light woods. That he

had an impressive collection of poems by William Blake, Edgar Allen Poe in one room, and a lot of Charles Baudelaire – including a scrawled original on parchment – in multiple rooms.

He floated up the stairs, not having seen any sign of Pitch yet and wondering what he was doing. What did Pitch do in his spare time anyway? He grinned at the idea of Pitch just sitting there brooding all the time, but it probably wasn't likely. Then again, Jack really *did* spend a lot of his time just making snow and frost for the fun of it, so if the shoe fit...

The second level of the house was much the same as the first, except that the wardrobes began to contain clothing from more eras. He was shocked to find a series of children's books in one drawer, but then unsurprised to see graffiti throughout, where the children had been 'turned' into Fearlings with black ink. That was disturbing, and Jack put the books back softly, looking behind him, suddenly paranoid that he was going to get caught.

He stumbled upon a room decorated almost entirely in black, and in a grand, monstrous wardrobe, a liberal amount of rusted torture equipment. Jack stared at it, eyes wide.

'Well, huh,' he said, 'that shouldn't be as surprising as it *is*.'

He closed the wardrobe and left the rest of the rooms on the second level alone.

The third and final floor felt far more personal. It was in small details; the rugs were more plush and woven with more care. There were small original artworks, Russian drawings and engravings, framed along the walls. Jack knew now that Pitch had arrived on the planet evil, but the drawings and engravings themselves covered a range of subjects. Some were quite dark, and Jack wasn't entirely surprised to see an illustration of Baba Yaga in her mortar and pestle skilfully wrought by an illustrator. But others were of more romantic subjects. A family around a campfire, a stark winter background behind them. *Maybe he really did fight back against the darkness*, Jack thought, taking in all the illustrations. There were details that spoke of a sensuality and a care for environment that went against what he knew of the Nightmare King, the Boogeyman.

At the end of the corridor, the hallway ended in a large room that took up at least one half of the whole third storey. Pushed back against the wall was a huge four-poster bed, carved from walnut and draped with a heavy black fabric that had been embroidered with green leaves. The same motif made its way across the bedspread, and Jack was surprised to see, amongst all that darkness, a single pale green cushion.

The room was so big that there was a balcony leading off to one side as well as austere wooden benches near a fireplace. On the other side was a huge armchair with leather gloves draped over the armrest. There were – unsurprisingly – two wardrobes, a cabinet, several chests of drawers. Jack had already learned that Pitch liked to collect things and then hide them away in the dark. Whether it was children enfolded in shadow or a collection of disused fountain pens pushed to the back of a drawer.

Jack flew up to look at the top of the four poster bed, and traced his name in the dust that he found there. He bounced up on a draught of wind to look at the walnut carved light-shade, and then caught sight of himself in a full-length mirror and paused.

He floated down and tilted his head back, staring down as best as he could at the damage on his neck. He frowned. It looked nastier than it felt. Clear, red fingerprints had been scorched into his skin, and there at the centre, where her palm had pressed, the Nain Rouge had left a dark scorch mark. Jack touched his fingertips to it and swallowed. That was where his power had exited. He tilted his head this way and that, trying to see if it had caused any other damage, but aside from some mild, blue bruising, it was mainly that scorch mark over his trachea that was the problem. He

hoped it would heal, and that it wouldn't scar. He didn't want a reminder.

As an afterthought, he blew some frost across the mirror just to remind himself that he still could. It curled into its own pretty shapes even without his guidance, and he smiled at it in satisfaction. Life might be confusing as hell, but at least he still had winter at his fingertips.

As he looked at his frost-distorted face in the mirror, he raised a hand up to his hair and spread his fingers to it, mimicking the movements of Pitch when he'd offered comfort. It wasn't the same, but it made the memory more real, more vivid. Jack stared at himself hard. He'd always wanted more contact with others, but he'd never known it could be quite like that.

He decided he should probably stop his explorations, when a tiny wooden jewellery box drew his attention. It was pushed up against the far corner on top of a cabinet, and looked dusty. He couldn't say why he was drawn to it, except that he never saw Pitch wear jewellery and wondered what could possibly be in there.

He floated over and noticed a dusty, leather journal resting against the jewellery box. He opened it and saw yellowed pages, writing that he couldn't understand in a foreign alphabet. And then he opened the jewellery box.

He hadn't been expecting some old, burnt half of a locket with the smudged, soot-blackened illustration of a girl on it. He stared at both, turning the locket in his hand and then flicking through the pages of the journal. Years of being invisible had made him develop a blasé attitude towards snooping and eavesdropping. After all, when no one could see you, everything became eavesdropping, and Jack couldn't live with putting politeness ahead of his loneliness and desperation to know about the world and the people who were going on and living their lives unaware that he was there, watching them, reading their books over their shoulders, watching their television sets and sitting in with them at outdoor cinemas. He was more used to getting to know people through observation and listening, rather than direct interaction, since he'd had so little of it.

The tears that came to his eyes subsided rapidly as he blinked them away. It reminded him of Jamie, all that time ago, his book of beasts and people that hardly anyone believed in, and Jamie willing to believe no matter what. Jamie's belief had been a warm blue fire in his heart, and he missed it. He took a deep breath, and then jumped when he heard a throat clearing behind him.

He whirled around in the air and saw Pitch standing there, leaning in the doorway, an annoyed expression on his face.

Jack held up the locket and raised an eyebrow.

'You know, I found your torture equipment. Or some of it, anyway. What's this? A memento of some girl you tormented as the Boogeyman?'

Blood drained from Pitch's face and his eyes widened in horror. His fists clenched at his sides and Jack realised whatever he'd said, whatever he'd found, he was way off the mark. *Way off.*

The cry that issued from Pitch's mouth was inhuman in its intensity, and Jack had no time to think before the locket was snatched from him and then two clawed hands grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed him back into the wall with a heavy *thud*.

'I want you *out!*' Pitch whispered with a strained voice, and then transferred one of those merciless hands to Jack's throat, where his fingernails seemed to find all of the Nain Rouge's bruises, and dug in *hard*. Jack knew he couldn't choke, he *knew* it, but he couldn't stop choking at the gesture, at the violence that was building in Pitch's eyes.

Jack's fear responded, and Pitch either didn't notice or care. He drew Jack away from the wall and slammed him back into it with a roar, before throwing him several feet across the room. Jack was too dazed to let the wind catch him, and he slid across floorboards before coming to a tumbling halt. He grabbed quickly at his staff, which had clattered out of his shocked hand, and then slid open the glass door leading to the balcony before Pitch could follow him.

He turned once he'd launched off the edge of the balcony into the wind, expecting Pitch to be tearing after him. But instead, Pitch had fallen to the ground, back bowed and head almost touching his knees. He looked almost small and folded in on himself, and he seemed to have completely forgotten that Jack existed. Jack realised he looked *broken*.

Jack paused for a second. But only a second. He was confused, scared and not willing to stick around for any more unpredictable behaviour. He raced off in the direction of North's Workshop, heart pounding a heavy, frightened beat.

The Past Cannot Be Buried Deep Enough

Chapter Notes

I hope you enjoy! Thanks again for all the comments and kudos and bookmarks and subscriptions. We are beginning to move in the direction of actual chemistry now, which you know... I always get excited about, lol.

Jack arrived at North's some time later, feeling more drained than usual. There was extra security posted around North's Workshop, so that Jack had ten yeti glaring at him instead of a single Phil. Still, they all let him through.

North's eyes brightened when he saw Jack. He gently put down the shiny trains he had been designing with his combination of delicate magic and physical craftsmanship, and then spread his arms wide in greeting. Jack felt a corresponding warmth in his own chest, and offered a genuine smile, despite feeling shaken over how Pitch had treated him.

'What's up, North?' Jack said, grabbing a butter cookie from a plate that had appeared by his side, held up by an elf. The elf looked resentful when Jack actually took a cookie, and went off to a corner to eat the rest himself by some tinsel.

'Our little rabbit is here – though let's not tell him we are calling him that, yes? We have been working out what best to do about Unseelie Court. We cannot let situation lie, no?'

Jack nodded thoughtfully as he chewed the butter cookie. It was dry in his mouth, but it still tasted good. He suddenly realised he had no idea when he'd last eaten. He'd always been a scrounger, but he hadn't exactly been making any time for the enjoyment of food of late. When he swallowed a mouthful of cookie, he realised why. His throat, damn it.

'So aside from the Easter bilby, what about Toothiana and Sandy? Have they been helping?' Jack said.

This was good, he thought, *Normal* conversation, instead of being caught snooping and literally being thrown out of a house. Let's keep this up.

'Tooth is off gathering information with her little Baby Teeth. Sandy is sleeping up on the roof.'

Jack looked up through the whizzing toys as though he could see the Guardian of Dreams up through the roof itself. Since his conversation with Pitch, he wondered how he'd go about having a chat with Sandy about his history. He was curious about the small man's past, his history amongst the stars.

'Ah, still looking nasty, Jack,' North said.

He used his hand to keep Jack's head tilted up towards the roof. His fingers were surprisingly gentle as they brushed over the bruises, though it still hurt. Jack couldn't forget how viciously Pitch had grabbed at his neck. How unerringly his nails had dug into the bruises that were already there. He hadn't seen Pitch lose control quite like that ever before. He had gone utterly mad with whatever emotion had consumed him, and Jack knew in his heart he'd messed up, he'd said the

wrong thing. He wondered where he would go, because he didn't think he'd be welcome there anymore, and his own shack wasn't safe. He loved North's Workshop, and it was nice to visit, but he didn't love all the noise and clutter and colour. He had spent so much of his life around shades of blue and white, green and brown, around open skies, that he had only limited tolerance of enclosed spaces.

'Is it permanent?' Jack said, as North examined the blackened wound from which his power had exited. 'Will it ever come back?'

North's expression darkened and he placed a solid, stabilising hand on Jack's shoulder.

'You are lucky to be alive,' he said grimly. 'The Nain Rouge is a horror. More suited to bad and scary stories than to the real world. Imagine an appetite so large that only souls may sate it. She eats animals whole, sucks the souls from people, destroys spirits. I do not know why she has made allegiance with a waterhorse like the Each Uisge, but it does not mean good things. That,' North pointed at Jack's neck, 'is permanent.'

'Right,' Jack said, shakily. Hearing it confirmed by North, who was wise, and knew a great deal about the world, felt like a blow. He wrapped his own cold hand around his neck and grimaced. Maybe he could keep up his current energy levels if he just slept more. But he couldn't lie to himself, he missed the largeness of his power, the endlessness of it. The Nain Rouge had made it finite.

'How much has it affected you? And be *honest*,' North said.

Jack walked over to the wooden table and ran his fingers over one of the trains.

'I don't know yet. I can't do as much. I'm tired more. I want to sleep more.' *I passed out, I couldn't travel on the winds at first, it's hard to feel as carefree when I can't actually be carefree about my power anymore.*

'I miss Jamie,' Jack said, quietly, staring at the trains and wondering how Jamie's daughters were going. How his husband was dealing with his death. Time drifted by and Jack realised that he'd said the words out loud. He turned cautiously to look at North, who staring at him with a sad expression on his face.

'Ah, we could have been better to you. I am sorry, Jack. We have lost touch with individual children, and when they become adults, we do not guard them any longer. It is being so easy to forget that you make *strong* connections with others, that this is a part of your strength. But not without its costs, eh?'

He walked over and sat down at the table, turning a train delicately in his large hands. 'And you are in real danger, Jack,' North said suddenly, 'The Each Uisge was not lying, your powers are large and useful. With you, they are snow days and the excitement of winter, the wisdom that running and playing through the snow will keep you warmer than just standing there, and warm the heart too! But in the hands of another...'

'Yeah, I'm kind of getting that,' Jack said, thinking back to how Pitch tried to recruit him in Antarctica. Thinking back to how he talked up their power together, the huge, frightening and yet beautiful sculpture they'd inadvertently made. Were the shadows still pursuing him even now, just in a different form? 'Not to mention that Pitch found an animal skin at my home, and you know, the Nain Rouge is *stalking* me. That's been a ton of fun.'

North's dark eyebrows drew together.

‘Why was Pitch at your cabin?’

‘Oh!’ Jack said, realising that so much had happened in such a short space of time. ‘Uh, he kind of, I was weak when I left here the other day. He kind of...helped me there, I guess?’

It felt so weird to say it out loud, and Jack breathed a laugh. ‘He helped in his own way. He was just going to leave me at my home, but told me the shack wasn’t safe, and...’

What would he say? *I spent the night at Pitch’s house. And aside from a really bad nightmare caused by Mora who you don’t actually know about and Pitch losing his mind over a burnt piece of jewellery, it’s gone pretty well. I’m actually a little annoyed at myself for messing things up.*

‘*Could* he have changed?’ North said to himself, staring down at his hands. ‘It is hard to believe.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘Yet I see something in him now, that I have never seen before. Something which we were told had existed once, but that I could not risk believing in. It is not wise to give the shadows an ounce of mercy. We have learned that to our detriment in the past.’

‘He saved my life, North. That wasn’t a lie. He didn’t have to. He could’ve just...let me die.’

North blew his exhale out between pursed lips, rocked back in his chair.

‘What does your heart tell you?’ North said.

‘My heart?’ Jack had no idea what to say or think sometimes when North asked him to do things like that. Look into his heart, search for something beyond instinct, find a centre. North seemed to find his way to all these shifts in perception easily. If he applied his mind to something, he was so willing to see the wonder in it that behind even his greatest fierceness grew a willingness to learn, to grow, to be open to change. Jack found it harder. But he tried. He withdrew his awareness into himself, past the constant sense of his now-finite power and into his centre. But he couldn’t see anything, he was reluctant to place his faith in Pitch even now. He shook his head slowly as he pushed his train towards North’s.

‘I wish I could say.’

‘Give it time,’ North said, and then linked up his own train with Jack’s and pushed them back in Jack’s direction. ‘We have meeting with Seelie Court any day now. We have defeated the shadows once, and with a bigger force I am hoping we can do it again, no? There is more violence in the world every day, more deaths, more loss. The Each Uisge is taking waterways and lakes, encouraging other Unseelie wights to do the same. It is making sourcing fresh water harder. A waterhorse like the Each Uisge is dangerous.’

‘He didn’t seem as bad as the Nain Rouge,’ Jack said, and North tilted his head, considering.

‘It is a different evil. Less impulsive, more planned. Where she wishes to consume, he wishes to dominate. The Each Uisge has hungered for power for at least as long as I have known of him. He is not like regular waterhorses that lure one, two unsuspecting victims into a lake and are sated for a year. And he is very powerful. Even before the shadows were his, he was always one to watch out for, one to never forget about. His glamour is part of his magic, he appears charming. Deep down he only wants to eviscerate and subjugate. He plays a long game, he is *dangerous*.’

Jack took a deep, slow breath.

'This is serious, isn't it? I mean, of course, because people are dying. But this is like, it could get way worse, couldn't it?'

'Hopefully we can stop that,' North said, and though his expression was fierce, his eyes were concerned.

'Can...can I stay here for a while?' Jack said, twirling his staff uneasily in his hands, hoping that North would say yes. It felt stupid asking, because he was part of the Guardians wasn't he? He should be here when the Seelie Court arrived. But he was asking less as a Guardian and more as someone who wanted a retreat, somewhere to not have to think about everything.

'Jack, of course!' North boomed happily, 'We would like nothing more than to have you stay! You should go visit Bunnymund, too, he was worried about you before.'

'Really?' Jack said, sceptically. It wasn't that he and Bunnymund didn't get along, they did nowadays, it was just that Bunny was so abrupt and abrasive that sometimes he felt as though the huge, furry Guardian would have been happier if Jack had never accepted his place amongst the Guardians.

'Oh yes. He'd *never* say so, but he has large soft spot for you. Huge!'

Jack laughed, and felt a little better. He wished he could talk about Mora, the nightmares, Pitch, *everything*, but in lieu of that, it simply felt good to be in a place filled with wonder and magic and light.

He floated up and out of the chair, and was just about to extend his staff to North in a farewell similar to dipping one's hat, when North stood up, reached out with his arms and pulled Jack into a hug. His eyes widened in shock as he felt the huge arms around him, the strength of North surrounding him. It felt... it felt really good, Jack realised, sagging into the embrace and wrapping his arms cautiously around his middle (not that they got very far). He could feel North breathing deeply, he could smell cinnamon, ginger, pine and peppermint. North was warm and fatherly and his beard was surprisingly soft as it tickled the side of his face.

'I know things have been hard,' North said quietly, his voice a deep, vibrant rumble. His arms squeezed tightly, and instead of feeling suffocated, Jack felt safe. 'If we don't understand, it is not because we don't *want* to understand. Come and talk to us about Jamie. Come and talk to me. And remember, it is okay to have your centre shaken from time to time. It doesn't mean you are doing bad job or that you are not being true to yourself. You have been through much, and we are here for you.'

North released him and Jack floated a few feet backwards, wishing that the hug hadn't ended, wanting more. It embarrassed him, sometimes, how hungry he was for touch. He would never tell the others, but he soaked it up like a food. He was so dazed by it, that he had to mentally replay everything that North had said to him again, and when he did, he offered North a beaming grin.

'You're the best,' he said, and North nodded, returning the smile.

He floated off to find Bunnymund and see what mischief he could make.

*

'What the- Why is this paint frozen?' Bunnymund tapped his paintbrush into the frozen paint and then got up and whirled around. 'Frostbite, I swear, if that's *you*, I'm going to tan your hide from here to Wagga Wagga.'

Jack laughed as he came out of hiding from behind a Christmas tree, and spread his arms innocently.

‘Come on, I only froze *one!*’

‘You froze the turquoise! Turquoise is a lovely colour and I’ll, hey, why are you looking at me like that?’

‘Is there any colour I should be freezing instead?’ Jack said, looking innocent. Bunnymund looked down at all of his pots of paint and turned back as though he was actually going to suggest one, when his face shifted into a scowl.

‘Now look here, you little-’

‘Can’t even leave your work at home, can you? How many eggs have you painted so far?’

‘Mate, unlike you, we can’t all go around like larrikins. Some of us have wor-’

‘North said you were *worried* about me. Is that true? Were you worried about little ol’ Jack?’

Bunnymund’s scowl became even fiercer, if it was possible, and then he muttered something scathing under his voice that sounded like, ‘I’m gonna kill that Christmas idiot if it’s the last thing I do.’

‘Play nice, Bunny. I’m just kidding. Look, here, I’ll help out. Can I paint one?’

‘I don’t know, do you freeze *everything* you touch?’

Jack shook his head, floating over and picking up one of the little eggs and turning it around in his fingers. Bunnymund watched him suspiciously and then pushed over some pots of paint and handed him some brushes. Jack took them with a smile and looked at the colours before him.

‘How do you pick what colours to paint them?’

‘Well, I just know, don’t I? I’m the Easter Bunny mate, it comes with the territory. I’m not about to ask you how to make...snow come out of my paws. Just pick some colours and she’ll be apples.’

Jack started, as Bunnymund continued with his work (pushing the frozen pot of paint away, grumbling all the while). He watched how Bunnymund did it. A base colour of paint, followed by the introduction of precise shades and patterns, and then found himself concentrating deeply as he tried to copy him. It was strange to actually have to use his fingers like this to manipulate a brush of colour, instead of just creating frost directly from his fingertips.

A few minutes passed, and Jack put one egg down. It was dry as soon as it touched the table. Like everything the Guardians did, things went a little faster when they had their own magic in the mix. Bunnymund’s magic helped to create the season of spring, the feeling of hope, but it also helped plants to grow, roots to take hold, and paint to do exactly what you needed it to do in the moment. Jack could see that his design didn’t look nearly as good as Bunny’s. And that, without even thinking, he’d painted his in shades of blue and white.

‘Not bad,’ Bunny said, looking over at it. ‘Can’t keep your frost out of anything though, can you?’

‘I didn’t freeze the paint!’

‘No, but that looks like little snowflakes to me,’ he pointed at the white, six pointed patterns Jack

had painted along the base of the egg.

‘Yeah, well,’ Jack said, shrugging apologetically. Bunnymund noticed Jack’s discomfort, and his ears dropped a little.

‘I like the help, mate,’ he said, ‘It’s good. How’ve you been, anyway?’

‘Good, you know, considering how much evil seems to be floating around out there at the moment. Uh, actually, I wanted to ask you something. You knew Pitch, before, didn’t you? You said his name, and he told me that...you knew that he was from space?’ Saying it out loud made Jack wonder if Pitch had just played a very elaborate prank on him.

Bunnymund put his egg down and tilted his head at Jack.

‘He *told* you?’

‘Yeah, I don’t know, we had a moment where he shared a bunch of...look, it’s hard to explain,’ Jack laughed at himself. ‘But, it seems like he really has changed. What I wanted to know though, is why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t I know that he had this big, elaborate back story? Why keep that quiet?’

Bunnymund looked down at the paints before looking up again.

‘Because, mate, he might have been true blue once, but he hasn’t been that way for a long time.’

‘And...what if he’s changed?’

‘You think he’s changed?’ Bunnymund said and then his eyes narrowed. ‘He’s led you a merry chase around the garden path before, y’know. I seem to recall quite well indeed the consequences of *that*.’

Jack subsided into silence, taking one of the blank eggs and dipping it into some bright blue paint. Of course Bunnymund could recall the consequences, Easter had been lost that year, and even though Jack hadn’t orchestrated the event, he still felt responsible, especially as so much of it had happened while he was trying to chase down his memories, trying to do something selfish. He didn’t like to think about that time much.

‘But,’ Bunny continued gently, tone changing as he noticed Jack’s change in demeanour, ‘if anything could change him, it’d be having the shadows removed. That’d do it, I think. Come on, paint some more, a few snowy looking ones in the mix might keep the little nippers on their toes.’

They worked in silence for a little longer. Bunnymund painted about ten eggs to every one that Jack finished, but Jack’s were starting to look more and more presentable. He wasn’t really comfortable using many colours outside of the cool spectrum. Every now and then Bunny would point out something that Jack was doing that he thought was particularly good, or beautiful, and Jack would feel a burst of warmth inside of him. Bunnymund may have been grumpy for the most part, but when they worked together, Bunny was surprisingly effusive with his praise, not afraid of calling art wonderful, or lovely, or saying ‘great job there, mate.’

It made Jack try even harder. It reminded him of a memory he’d seen, a memory that had been attached to one of his teeth. He had been learning how to become a shepherd, it had been his father’s job and he was to follow in his footsteps. He had grown up having little to do with his father, since he was so often away, but he loved him all the same. And being a shepherd was a reputable job within his family and one he hoped to continue with pride. But though he knew almost all the trails and ways to guide his sheep, having the responsibilities transferred down from

his father had been difficult. Learning that if the sheep died on his watch, there would be no one else to blame but himself had been a burden. He much preferred playing with his sister, bothering the sheep themselves, climbing trees, playing with the other kids, causing havoc.

But he would never forget the time he'd gone a month on his own without any of the sheep being lost to predators at a time when almost everyone else had lost at least two or three of their flock. He had come home and his father had presented him with a brand new shepherd's crook, lovingly carved from wood with a nice hook to it and a perfect heft. It had a nice, rough finish so that it would be easier to grab or curtail any wayward sheep. And his father had looked at him with the same mischievous spark that Jack often had in his own eyes and said; 'You're doing good, son. You're going to make a fine shepherd.' And as Jack had flushed with pride, his father had used that very same shepherd's crook to hook in his son for a hug.

Bunnymund cleared his throat and Jack looked at him with wide eyes, blinking rapidly, feeling like he was coming out of a daze. And then he followed Bunny's gaze back down to the egg he was painting. To his surprise, it was a brilliant flare of pinks and oranges, covered in small red and white spirals. It was completely different from anything he'd ever painted so far.

'Okay. Where'd that come from?' he said, wonderingly. And Bunnymund's whiskers twitched.

'I don't know, but I reckon whoever gets that one will be pretty bloody lucky if you ask me.' Jack looked up at Bunny, and they shared a smile.

They got back to work, and after some more silence, Bunny put down his egg and stretched broadly.

'Y'know, I knew Kozmotis. Not personally, mind. But back, a long time ago, before Tooth was a Guardian, before a lot of things. I was given an opportunity to travel back in time. And what Pooka wouldn't be interested in something like that? So back I went, and I saw him. I saw him with those patterns on his robes, and that sword, guarding the worlds from something terrible.'

Bunny's eyes unfocused as he remembered, and then he shuddered as though he had come across something awful. His ears fell down, and his fur pressed flat to his skin.

'I prefer not to think about it.'

'You saw him getting possessed by the shadows?' Jack said, putting his own egg down.

'Exactly how much did he tell you?' Bunnymund said, his eyes widening. 'Pitch getting all cosy about his back-story doesn't sound like...Crikey. And why was he telling you anyway? Tell me you're not putting yourself in danger.'

'Does that sound like me?' Jack said, raising his eyebrows.

'That sounds *exactly* like you.'

'There's more to the story though, isn't there?' Jack said, insistent. 'A locket?'

Bunnymund's whiskers pushed forward, his ears perked forward. Everything about him screamed alert and locked on Jack with undivided attention, it was disconcerting.

'What do you know about it?'

Jack thought about lying, he even thought about trying to trick the story out of Bunnymund, and then decided that it wasn't worth it. Maybe honesty would be the best choice.

'I...not much. I found it. The locket. And I didn't know, I don't know anything about it. Pitch didn't react well, though, to me finding it. Haha, understatement.'

'What are you doing hanging out with Pitch?' Bunnymund said, incredulous, and Jack held up his hands.

'No, no, it's not *hanging out*. It's just, I mean, he *helped* me, and-'

'You *found* the locket?' Bunnymund said sceptically. 'What, it was just lying around on a table? I know you, Jack. You didn't just find it, did you? What were you doing looking through his things? There's no way on this planet or any other bloody planet that he'd leave that lying around.'

'No, but, I mean come on-'

'Come on? *You* come on, Jack! He may have changed, mate, but let's not forget that only a few decades ago he tried to kill us all. He nearly destroyed Easter, and me, and Toothiana, and he *did* destroy Sandy, who just happens to be so bleeding resilient that he came back from whatever dark hell Pitch sent him. And you don't even know the half of what he's capable of, how many people he's *killed*. What are you doing? I know some tough things have happened to you lately, mate, but I don't understand why you're so quick to forget that even if Pitch has changed, he can't *ever* go back to who he was. Not completely. Not ever. That is a changed man. That is someone who is part monster, and you can't forget that.'

Jack felt attacked by the lecture, and he backed off from the table with his hands in the air.

'You're right, you don't understand,' Jack said, trying to keep his voice even, 'All of you. You're so far away from you once were, and none of you has ever *died*. You didn't spend years down at the bottom of a frozen lake, *in the dark*, and then wake up only to realise that you're some...that you're not even lucky enough to be the figment of someone's imagination. You haven't been invisible for... and Pitch, he gets it. I mean, what, you were invisible for a few *days* and look at how you dealt with it! You couldn't keep it together!

'And he has changed. He's different now. And I know that's not just me. If it was, you would never have let him out of the Workshop the other day like you did. You wouldn't have called him by the name Kozmotis. You can tell too, can't you? You're just scared to admit it. Stop being overprotective, I'm not some idiot teenager anymore. Level with me, how much of the monster did you see when he came and stood on *our* side, sword out, against whatever new threat is coming.'

Jack almost felt tempted to share what Pitch had told him about feeling compelled to protect the Guardians, and then decided there'd be no fun in that. Especially while Pitch was still conflicted about it all.

'But he's an unpredictable creature,' Bunny said, imploring. 'He's not some noble warrior. And even if he is, he has to reckon with *everything* he's done. It destroys a man, Jack, to even kill one or two people. Pitch has been *destroyed* by loss. And you haven't, Jack. You're the Guardian of Fun, for heaven's sake!'

Jack drifted down to the floor, pained and breathless. Maybe Jack hadn't been destroyed by loss, but he didn't feel whole either, he didn't feel himself. And Bunnymund didn't get it.

'Then,' Jack exhaled, 'then why do I feel so broken?'

Bunnymund stared at Jack, his expression shifting from belligerence to shock, and then into something else that Jack couldn't put a finger on. He looked absolutely floored.

‘Jack,’ he said, shaking his head. Jack waited for him to disagree with him, to tell him that he had nothing to feel broken over, to say that he was too young to understand, to tell him that he wasn’t one of them and that even now he didn’t fit in. But Bunnymund didn’t say anything of those things. Instead, he stood up and approached Jack cautiously, as though he thought the winter sprite would just shoot off into the air at any moment. But Jack didn’t move as he came closer and closer. When Bunnymund took his staff out of his hand and leaned it against the table, he felt confused.

And he was *definitely* confused when he felt two great paws wrap around his back, similar to North’s hug. His face was pressed into Bunny’s chest, and he turned to the side so that he didn’t just have a faceful of fur. A furry chin rested on top of his head.

Do I really cut such a pathetic figure these days? First North, now Bunny.

‘Don’t tell anyone else I did this,’ Bunny said quietly, ‘it’ll ruin our reputation. And don’t start thinking that this means I’m going to stop taking the piss out of you.’

‘Perish the thought,’ Jack said, pushing his hands through Bunny’s coarse fur. The great rabbit shivered a little.

‘You are *cold*.’

‘You smell like carrots,’ Jack said, inhaling. He really did.

Bunny released him and took an awkward step back, as Jack took his staff back in hand.

‘I just want you to be careful,’ Bunnymund said. And then he rolled his eyes. ‘Though I don’t even know why I bother, because it’s not like it’s your nature to be careful.’

‘It’s really not,’ Jack said, and then he looked down at his own bare feet. ‘I am trying though. Maybe I just see something in him right now, because, you know, I’d be *dead* otherwise.’

Bunnymund started to reply, and then turned to look at the door expectantly. A few seconds later North looked in and smiled to see the two of them in the same room together. Jack thought it was a neat trick, that Bunny could tell who was coming like that.

‘Uh, Jack? You have visitor.’

‘A...excuse me?’

‘Pitch is waiting outside for you. You want I should send him away?’ North looked like he actually wanted Jack to send Pitch away; any excuse to get out his sabres and come across as fierce, apparently.

Jack didn’t know what to say for a moment. Pitch had come to see *him*? Why? To continue berating him, or for something else? Why would he come back? He had honestly thought that would be the last he’d see of Pitch for a while.

‘Jack?’ North prompted and Jack nodded absently.

‘Yeah, yeah, I’m coming. I mean, I’ll go see him. It’s fine guys. It’s fine.’ He rose up and sped off through the workshop, leaving a flurry of snow and two bemused Guardians behind him.

*

Pitch was standing in the middle of a field of snow, wearing the same robe, sword strapped to his

back. Jack was struck by how regal and still he looked, standing there. How, with his aquiline nose and carved features, he looked like a bird of prey surveying the space around him. There was almost no sign of the brokenness that Jack had seen when he'd been sent away, no sign of a man bowed by something too heavy to bear.

Still, Jack took a deep, apprehensive breath as he approached. Pitch didn't face him, so he landed about twenty metres away and made the rest of the distance on foot so that Pitch could hear him and wouldn't be startled. Not that he thought that Pitch was unaware of his approach but...best to be on the safe side. He had no idea what to expect. His insides were crawling with guilt and fear.

Jack stopped when he was about three metres away. Pitch turned to face him slowly, and up close, Jack could see signs of grief. His eyes were unexpectedly red, there were shadows under them. The hair was more dishevelled than usual. Jack's heart clenched. *He'd* done that. It suddenly struck him that he had just as much power to screw this...whatever this was with Pitch, as much as Pitch did. Jack's own ability to ruin something scared him, and he looked off into the distance instead, unaccustomed to this sense of his own power when interacting with another person. He'd been invisible to so many for so long, that the idea that he could ruin something, that he could hurt someone like this, made him feel sick all the way through his body.

'Why, Jack, *how* is it that you are more afraid of yourself than you are of me?' Pitch said, and Jack shrugged.

'I messed up,' he said, indicating the eavesdropping, what he'd said about the girl in the locket.

Pitch didn't say anything for a long while, and Jack wondered if that was it. If this would be their whole chat.

'You did. But then so did I,' Pitch said, heavily. He was still for another minute, and then he seemed to come to a decision. He reached inside his robe and brought out something small. He cradled it in the palm of his hand, and then held his arm out, palm up, the burnt locket resting in it. He watched Jack quietly, but the gesture was unmistakeable.

Jack stepped up tentatively and looked down at the locket, and then blinked, startled, when Pitch moved his hand again, indicating that Jack should take it.

He took it as gently as possible, knowing that it was important, precious, more special than he could possibly understand. He stared down at it, and a wave of remorse washed over him.

'I shouldn't have gone through your things like that,' Jack said, voice smaller than he'd intended it to be. 'It's been a long time since... that mattered. Since things like that mattered. Uh, and, you know, I'm sorry I said what I said. You know me, thinking about what I say before I say it is not like, not really something I do. So, I guess, I shouldn't ha-'

'It is not only you who should be apologising,' Pitch said. Jack looked up at him, but he, too, was staring down at the locket in Jack's hands. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to snatch it back, but when Jack offered it back, he shook his head minutely. The expression on his face was terrible.

'I forgot that eavesdropping is probably not a cool thing to do to people you can actually see. I have a few habits like that, and I-'

Pitch interrupted him with the deep, sharp breath that he took. He pinched bridge of his nose and closed his eyes as though he were in pain, and then he looked out into the mountains, as though he could find what he was looking for there.

And then his gaze moved back to Jack with focus and his face twisted.

‘She was my daughter,’ he said, all the lilt and play from his voice absent, turning his natural tone dark and flat.

Jack took a step backwards without even thinking about it, so shocked that he could hardly fit what he’d heard into his mind. Pitch’s whole body lurched forward with the movement, as though tied by threads to the locket itself. It was as though he expected Jack to destroy it at any moment. Jack stared down at it again, mind racing away, his index finger coming up as though he could trace the edge of it. But he didn’t want to accidentally send frost over the surface, so instead he just stared, unable to fit the information in his head.

‘That is my only real keepsake,’ Pitch said, voice drifting away from its usual smooth timbre into something rough and lost.

‘Why am I holding it?’ Jack whispered.

‘Because I wanted you to,’ Pitch said, ‘Because I wanted to prove something to myself.’

‘You...’ Jack said, but trailed off, unable to think of how to finish that sentence. *You had a daughter? You were a father?* Jack wanted to know what happened to her, and why there was only a locket left, and why it was burnt. Jack stared at Pitch, breathing shallow, suddenly feeling like the worst person in the world for implying that he’d somehow tortured his daughter.

‘What...happened?’ Jack said, and then shook his head rapidly when Pitch’s expression twisted into a grimace. ‘You don’t have to tell me, you know. I mean, I want to know, I’m just saying that I’d understand if you didn’t want to say, after what I said. Or you know, even if I hadn’t majorly screwed everything up.’

Pitch absorbed Jack’s words and then stretched his hand out again. Jack placed the locket back as tenderly as he possibly could, and watched as Pitch tucked it away in some pocket on the inside of his robes.

This is it, he doesn’t want to talk about it, and now he’s going to leave.

But instead, Pitch sat down on the snow. He folded his legs underneath him and rested his bare hands on the snow directly.

‘The cold doesn’t bother you?’ Jack asked in surprise as he sat down as well. They were only about a metre away from each other now, close enough that Jack could reach out and actually feel the fabric of the robe, if he wanted to.

‘Do you know how cold it gets up there, among the stars?’ Pitch said with a wry smile. He looked at Jack, speculative, and then his face sobered.

‘I was always so, *so* focused on duty. On my duty,’ Pitch said, some of the familiar lilt returning to his voice. He sounded weary, but grounded. Jack wondered how long he’d sat in his house, hurt by Jack’s actions, and he dug his fingers into the snow like another might shove their hands into their pockets.

‘The endless hours of training, not just physical drills, but mental as well. It left no time for relationships with anyone other than my fellow warriors, and a Tsar and Tsarina or two. We were fighting a terror that grew quickly, easily, required our *constant* focus. It was just as much a surprise to me as it was to a fellow warrior then, that we ended up finding ourselves in the heat of battle with that elusive thing that humans call *chemistry*. And it was not long-term but it flared

intense and thoroughly and by the end of it... *I had a daughter.*'

He said the words with so much awe that Jack wished he could grab them, cradle them. He hadn't known that Pitch could contain such a huge spectrum of emotions inside him.

Silence stretched out between them, and Jack waited, heart aching.

'I would have done *anything* for...' Pitch stopped and then started again. 'I was already great in strength and power, but then I became determined to become the *greatest*. I learned something about myself, Jack, that I hadn't known. I hadn't known how love for a child could change *everything*. Most of us didn't know that, so many of us, we had no time for love in the sense that everyone else celebrated it. We had love for our country and our rulers inborn, and it was enough to sustain us, to make us fierce. So I did not know that my love for her would make me stronger. I had thought,' and here Pitch laughed at himself, 'I had thought it would make me *weaker*.'

He spread his palms, staring down at them as though he could capture the past, or at the very least see it there, playing out in front of him.

'I had a naive father's dream, to defeat the darkness so my daughter could be raised in a world of light. Many fathers want that for their children, but I was *trained*, I was one of the few who could actually achieve such a glory.' Pitch was breathless for a moment, talking with the fervour of one who still – Jack realised with a sudden jolt – believed in the dream. Who still believed that the darkness could be defeated.

Who are you? he thought, wishing the other Guardians could hear what Pitch was saying.

Pitch cleared his throat. His face moving from awe and determination to something darker, something tired.

'And I did achieve that glory. We all did, but I was at the helm of the army, I directed the strategies. It was my plan, my deception. And you cannot imagine, Jack, how *everyone* celebrated. Everyone. Nothing left to fear amongst *all* of the constellations! Children left to be raised in safety, loved by their loved ones, unfearing of the dark.'

Pitch bowed his head. His hand crept to his torso and rested there, and for a moment Jack thought that he was in physical pain before he realised that was where the locket was hidden.

'It came with a price. The remainder of the evil needed a guard, and there was only one strong enough to guard them.'

'You,' Jack said, eyes widening.

'At first it was an honour to guard the Constellations from such evil. But it wore at me. It chased my dreams and hopes down. Seraphina could not even visit, because it was so unsafe. The remainder of the shadows had been imprisoned, but they could not be *silenced*. It was not a place fit for children, or – indeed – almost anyone. The shadows, they whispered endlessly. *Endlessly*. They seeped poison from beyond their prison. It didn't matter how much I wished to see her beautiful face again, I could not have her there in such a place. Nor could I leave it, and leave all that monstrosity unguarded.'

Pitch clutched at the locket and Jack swallowed. *This is not a good story*, which was something he had known, but now it began to hit him, there was no way this could end well. No way. Not knowing that Pitch had been possessed by those very shadows.

'Their voices were wily,' Pitch continued, 'and I, a fool. Months drifted by, and I was weary. I

could only sleep in minutes, and their whispered poison was strong enough to infect the minds of the other warriors who tried to relieve me. But I had something to keep me strong. I had a picture of her in a locket. I could not look at it often, for the shadows can tell the weaknesses of others. Just as I could read fear, so could they see into the hearts of others and see their hopes and crush them. I was loath to look at it often, but I regret that as time passed, I needed her face more and more to sustain me, to remind me of my purpose.

‘Imagine, then, how I reacted when they pretended to be her. When I heard her voice shrieking in distress, from behind the prison walls. I knew – better than anyone – how cunning they were, it did not seem beyond conception that they could find a way to take her. But I knew, also, that it was a trick, a trick to predate upon the tired. And I waited, as long as I could. But their voices were a hook in me, and there was no one who could even come down to talk me out of my madness. And I *was* driven mad, trying to withstand her cries, her pain, her *fear*.’ Pitch paused and looked at Jack. ‘Driven mad by what I thought they might be *doing* to her.’

‘No,’ Jack said, in sudden denial as all the pieces fell together. He turned away, embarrassed. He pressed fingers into his eyes and swallowed at the lump in his throat and suddenly didn’t want Pitch to see him, to see his distress. He wanted to be stronger than this, damn it, he hadn’t even been the one to live through it.

‘Jack,’ Pitch whispered, and Jack shook his head rapidly, wiping the tears away so that Pitch couldn’t see them. They formed a salty rime on his fingers, and he brushed it away on his hoodie.

‘I want you to look at me,’ Pitch said, insistent, and Jack thought that he could at least do that much, couldn’t he? After everything Pitch had told him?

He turned back, frustrated with his inability to keep it together. He felt like he owed Pitch more than that. But Pitch was looking at him hungrily, as though he wanted Jack’s reaction, as though he was looking for someone to respond to the story.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said, suddenly. ‘I’m not even the one who lived through it, right?’

He wiped the back of his hand hurriedly over his cheeks and offered a quick, self-deprecating laugh. The more he thought about it, the more he realised how truly tragic Pitch’s story was. He thought back to his own actions, and the actions of the other Guardians and shook his head in slow, horrified wonder.

‘They took you hostage, the shadows took you hostage,’ Jack said, his voice wet. ‘And then we let them take control of you again, and left you in a prison with them. Yeah. Great. I-’

‘It was the right thing to do,’ Pitch said, sure.

‘How could that be the right thing to do?’

‘It’s what I would have wanted.’ Pitch winced to hear himself say it. ‘It’s what...Kozmotis Pitchiner sacrificed celebration and time with Seraphina for. And if I had been strong enough, I would still be up there now, withstanding the dark, and not crumbling in the presence of my own fears.’

Jack pressed his hand over his face because he was actually going to *cry*. His chest ached. He tried to imagine the scale of Pitch’s grief, his sacrifice. He couldn’t.

‘I feel reluctantly compelled to inform you that this high emotion could be a side effect from the nightmare that Mora induced,’ Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

‘Seriously?’ Jack said, looking up and ignoring the burn of salt water that pressed at his own eyes, the lump in his throat.

‘Without adequate reassurance immediately after something like that, it can take a while to recover. I did say-’

‘I...I felt like I had,’ Jack paused and looked up at the sky as though it would give him strength, ‘I thought I had adequate reassurance.’

‘Did you?’ Pitch said, eyes narrowing.

There was a silence as Jack thought about how ruined he’d been by the nightmare, and how Pitch had told Mora to back off, how he’d stayed. His skin seemed to whisper with the memory of his fingers moving through his hair, touching the side of his cheek, enfolded in his own hand. It was a whisper that left him wanting more, wanting to learn and appreciate. He thought about all that Bunnymund had said to him and sighed.

‘This is a mess,’ Jack said, ‘I have no idea what we’re doing.’

‘We?’ Pitch said, brows knitting together like Jack had just presented him with some kind of word puzzle.

‘Well, yeah, I mean, haven’t I been staying at your house lately? And you know, here’s you with the telling me your whole life story. Or at least some of it. I mean, look at us. You kept asking me why I came back, but why this? Why...tell me this?’ He looked over at Pitch warily. ‘I don’t get the sense that you tell that one at every opportunity.’

Pitch folded his hands together in his lap in a precise manner, lining up each one of his fingers and then contemplating the interlinked hands as though they held deep and profound answers. When he looked up, there was a tired amusement playing over his features that seemed entirely out of place.

‘Perhaps I just thought it may stop you from snooping again in the future.’

Jack smiled.

‘Any chance of getting a serious answer?’ Jack said, tracing a swirl into the snow.

A few seconds later, Pitch reached over and extended the pattern. The spiral he made was easy and quick, and Jack was surprised to see how graceful Pitch’s hands were as they moved through the snow, unbothered by the cold. It was such a novelty, seeing someone else’s hands move unimpeded through the ice crystals without complaint. He stared down in wonder and then looked up at Pitch’s face, but Pitch was staring down at the snow instead, looking perplexed.

Jack thought he looked sad, lost, alone. It was familiar and yet not, because he’d lost people, but he hadn’t done all the things that Pitch had done, hadn’t experienced them, hadn’t lived hundreds of years possessed by shadows, betraying the trust of others as he had been betrayed by the darkness.

Jack took a quick breath and reached out with his hand, grasping Pitch’s hand in his own and holding it. Pitch tensed, and Jack had a moment of fear where he thought that his hand would be shaken off; unwanted. And then a second fear chased it, a fear that it felt nice, this skin to skin contact. That maybe he wanted more of it, and that maybe he specifically wanted it from Pitch, and the realisation chased the breath from his throat so that he had to inhale deeply before saying what he wanted to say.

‘Thanks,’ Jack said, ‘for telling me all that.’

Pitch was staring down at where their hands met.

‘I don’t know what this is,’ Jack said, looking at Pitch’s expression and wishing that he could just feel simple dislike, simple fear, simple *anything*. He knew that Pitch could read his fears like this, probably even more easily with the direct contact. He knew that Pitch could tell that he wanted more, because he was *scared* of wanting more. ‘It scares me.’

Pitch made a sound of frustration in the back of his throat, a harsh breath.

‘You are so open,’ Pitch said in a kind of dismay, withdrawing his hand.

‘And that’s a bad thing?’ Jack said, trying not to get defensive, because this Pitch wasn’t necessarily going to tear him apart just because he was being honest. Pitch ran fingers through his hair and then looked at Jack with a bewildered expression.

‘I don’t, in *all* honesty, know how you’ve survived for so long.’

‘You think my openness is naivete?’ Jack said, frowning.

‘I seem to recall how willing you were to just *surrender your power* in exchange for a birdling.’

‘Okay, well, *that* was naive,’ Jack agreed, and then he shrugged. ‘A lot of people respond pretty well to openness. A lot of spirits in particular. It’s kept me pretty well the past three hundred years.’

‘You shouldn’t have trusted me, or my loneliness in Antarctica,’ Pitch said, ‘Your naivete was, and will be, startlingly easy to exploit by the shadows. But there was a truth in all of it as well. A truth about my own loneliness. A truth about yours.’

Jack nodded, couldn’t tell whether he felt better or worse that Pitch – in his own way – was acknowledging their connection.

‘But, Jack,’ Pitch said, looking down at the hand that Jack had held, as though he could see residue of Jack’s touch on it. ‘I am not a hero. I’m not Kozmotis Pitchiner, even as I am not quite Pitch Black. And I am not one to deprive myself. I *like* the taste of your fear. If you keep offering it up to me so freely, I will take you up on it.’

‘On what?’ Jack said, feeling as though his heart was hammering its way slowly through his sternum.

Pitch raised a single, predatory eyebrow.

‘How long has it been, little sprite, since someone has touched you with any consistency? Tell me, again, how much you fear contact, how much you still *want* it? Pretend that the words would ever be as adequate as the fear that moves through you, even now.’

Pitch’s voice had gone dark, it almost purred with knowing. And Jack felt rooted to the spot. Pitch stared at him as though he was peeled open and all of his secrets were there to see. It was one thing to acknowledge that he didn’t know what they were doing, that he didn’t know what he was feeling, and another to have Pitch put his finger on the spot inside of him he had been trying not to look at, and press down.

‘Uh,’ Jack said, exhaling. ‘This isn’t- I mean, it’s not...’ he couldn’t finish. It wasn’t the only thing he thought about? That was true, but he still *thought* about it. That he was thinking about it with Pitch, about touch, about...more than just comfort, he wasn’t even ready to look at that himself,

was he? The novelty of simply having someone to talk to was itself so new, so unexpected, that anything beyond that seemed too big, too amorphous.

‘Cat got your tongue?’ Pitch said with a glimmer of his evil grin.

Jack laughed nervously and then looked down at the spirals they’d made in the snow.

Nope, no answers there.

‘Ah, Jack, you squirm so nicely. Where’s your sense of *fun*?’ The look Pitch gave Jack was downright playful, but behind it there was a hungriness, a wanting that Jack felt resonate in response deep in his gut.

‘I won’t go through your things again,’ Jack said, changing the subject hurriedly, and Pitch laughed behind a closed mouth.

‘It wouldn’t matter if you did. I have nothing else remaining for you to discover that would elicit the same reaction. Jack, you have an unerring ability to squirrel out those things which no one wants found, and have *no* idea what you’ve done in the process.’ Pitch began to say something else when his eyes widened and he stood up in a single, fluid movement that made Jack jealous for an instant, before he remembered he could just float into the air.

Jack’s mouth fell open in astonishment when he turned and saw what Pitch was staring at.

In the distance, a warrior with pale skin and white-blond hair walked. He seemed to glow with a supernatural light, and was clad in an armour made of creamy-white metal that Jack had never seen in all of his travels. He strode towards North’s workshop with an easy confidence, a physicality borne of years – hundreds even – of military training.

‘I do believe that is Gwyn ap Nudd,’ Pitch said, and Jack watched as the warrior disappeared into North’s Workshop.

‘Who?’

‘That, Jack Frost, is the bright King of the Seelie Court.’

Reconnaissance

Chapter Notes

Oh man, the response to this has been awesome. Thanks again for all the subs / bookmarks / kudos and the comments! Interacting with those who have been responding has been so motivational, and I'm really thankful.

Gwyn ap Nudd had a presence that commanded attention. Jack found he couldn't look away from him, drawn to everything from the glints on his armour made from that creamy metal, his intimidating height and muscular breadth, even the way his curling hair caught the light. It was as though at any point, he was lit by the bright morning sun. Whether outside or inside, he was imbued with an almost-glow that was hypnotic and compelling.

His voice was battle-hardened, deep, and he sounded ready for combat, always commanding. He greeted Bunnymund like an old friend, one massive hand clapping him on the back with an easy force that sent Bunny staggering forwards. He embraced North like they were brothers. And he'd ruffled Jack's hair like he was a two year old. Jack wanted to feel affronted, except that there was something so charming about Gwyn's demeanour that he decided to let it go.

The bright warrior did not even seem bothered that Pitch was there. He grasped the man's hand in between both of his own and shook it with an enthusiasm that made Pitch's eyes widen.

Sandy came down to join them, yawning and then beaming happily. And Tooth came a short while later, streaming in with her Baby Teeth, joining them in North's large strategy room, taking her place at a round, roughly-hewn table. She beamed at Gwyn in a way that suggested her appreciation at seeing him was perhaps more than a little friendly. Her Baby Teeth had practically all fallen into a swoon on and around the table. If Gwyn noticed – and Jack suspected he didn't miss much – he didn't appear to mind.

It occurred to Jack that this being – powerful enough to send Bunnymund staggering with a hand on the shoulder – *King* of the Seelie Court, was still – even with whatever members made up his team – not powerful enough to bring down the Unseelie Court and the living shadows. It gave him pause, made him think of the wound at his throat, of the charming but sinister Each Uisge, the predatory Nain Rouge, and the others that he hadn't yet met but that he knew were out there.

The meeting started. North, Bunnymund, Toothiana and Gwyn dominated the conversation, talking about deaths, rumours of deaths, countries worst affected. Jack found himself drifting off into daydreams and his own thoughts. Strategy was *boring*. This was definitely not his wheelhouse. He was aware of the hypocrisy in not wanting to miss anything, and yet finding it impossible to concentrate on the numbers of people who had died, on the geography of it, on the seriousness of a war. If he didn't immediately have to defend someone, then what was the point?

He dared a glance at Pitch, who was sitting at the opposite side of the table, eyes flickering between each of the speakers soberly. He seemed disinclined to join in, but also followed everything that was being said with an intensity that made Jack think of what he must have been like as a Golden Warrior all that time ago. Jack wondered if his presence at the table was dictated by that old, inborn instinct to protect and defend, and he wondered how much of that Pitch resented, even right now.

He hadn't seemed upset walking back into North's Workshop, nor had he seemed to grudge meeting Gwyn ap Nudd, if anything he'd seemed somewhat eager. And he'd taken the wariness of Bunnymund and Toothiana in his stride. Sandy didn't seem threatened by him at all, though Jack caught him punching one fist into an open palm menacingly when Pitch looked his way.

He'd expected there to be more dissent when it came to allowing Pitch to join them. But Gwyn's easy acceptance of Pitch seemed to change everything. Was that Gwyn's fae glamour? Or had Pitch and the other Guardians come to an understanding the other day, when Jack had left early because he'd felt so weak?

He looked at Pitch again, and his toes curled under the table. Had they really just had the conversation they'd had out in the snow? About his daughter, about his wish to defeat the darkness and his success and then inevitable, catastrophic failure? And...had Pitch really just told Jack he'd take him up on his fear? It had sounded terrifying at first, until Pitch had clarified what fear he was speaking of. It made Jack hyperaware of himself, of his body, of how he'd felt when Pitch had comforted him.

Did Pitch actually want to touch him? Jack wasn't any stranger to sex (although he'd been a stranger to it for a few decades now), it could be fun, and he enjoyed all forms of having a good time, but a lot of spirits didn't take him seriously and aside from a few 'rolls in the hay,' he'd never been a candidate for a relationship. The few times he'd actually had sex, it hadn't exactly been filled with a great deal of overall touch. No cuddling, no after-play, constant complaints about how cold he was. He'd been told he was too playful, not committed enough, and he rolled with it, played up the reputation, hid from how much it all hurt.

What did Pitch want? Did he only want Jack's fear? That wasn't going to last long, Pitch was getting less and less scary by the *day*. He'd seemed as hungry for touch as Jack was, but still, he was a serious guy, wasn't he? He probably liked serious company best. He probably found Jack's attention a novelty simply because he hadn't had much of it. And Jack figured Pitch probably wouldn't be interested once he'd established some more friendships, especially now that he wasn't possessed, now that he could be visible to other serious warrior types. Jack scratched at his shoulder absently, worried, off-kilter.

Jack stared fixedly at North and tried to concentrate, but his awareness of Pitch was like a prickling weight that wouldn't let up.

He dared a glance at Pitch again, and then froze. Pitch was staring straight at him with a knowing look in his eyes.

Well, shit.

Jack let his eyes drift away and pretended nonchalance, and he watched Toothiana like everything she was saying was the most interesting thing he'd ever heard. A minute passed and he chanced a sidelong glance at Pitch.

Pitch was still watching him, and after a few seconds of direct eye contact, Pitch smirked and then looked away again.

Hell. My life was so much easier when he was just some evil Nightmare King and I was just about snow days all the time. A lot easier.

'Is that where she got you?' Jack startled as Gwyn turned his full attention towards him, pointing at the marks on his neck. Jack nodded, feeling the weight of Gwyn's focus like a burst of sunlight. It was ridiculous. He didn't even sound charming, with his direct way of speaking. Jack didn't even

find most of the things he said interesting, he was so business-like. Even Bunnymund had a greater sense of fun and humour than Gwyn seemed to.

‘Yeah. It’s healing though,’ Jack said.

‘It is, that’s good. And you rescued him?’ Gwyn turned to Pitch, tilting his head. ‘How did you do that again? The Nain Rouge is formidable. Tell me.’

Pitch looked like he was contemplating what might be the best answer and then finally he pointed at the hilt of the sword which was visible over his shoulder.

‘It is forged from a rare metal.’

‘Let me see it. I’m familiar with most rare metals.’

Despite Gwyn’s brusque demeanour, Pitch didn’t seem perturbed as he drew the long, heavy sword out of its scabbard and then placed it down on the wood in front of the warrior. Gwyn studied it without touching it, and then he raised a hand as though he’d like very much to turn it in his hands. He looked first at Pitch as though asking permission, and when Pitch nodded once, he picked it up and examined it closely.

‘I might know about rare metals, but I haven’t ever seen the likes of this before. What’s this, an alphabet? What does it say?’

‘It’s the Lunar alphabet,’ Pitch said, focused entirely on Gwyn and ignoring the fascinated stares that the other Guardians were giving both him and the sword. ‘They are warrior’s sayings, all of our weapons have them.’

‘It is not the writing that gives the metal its ability to drive off the darkness? It’s the metal itself?’

‘Correct.’

‘It’s got a nice heft to it. Interesting design. Don’t see many two-handed ones like this, these days. People find the smaller, one-handed swords easier.’

‘I don’t need a sword to be easy, I need it to do its job,’ Pitch said with a matter-of-factness that made Gwyn laugh in appreciation.

‘True! As I was saying before,’ Gwyn said, holding the sword in his hands and addressing everyone. ‘I was elected to lead those willing amongst the Seelie fae against the coming darkness, some time ago. You have to understand, I prefer to helm the Wild Hunt, this is not my usual way of doing things. But you know how it goes,’ he said to North, who nodded in agreement.

‘I asked a diviner, one who tells the future, what she would recommend. And she told me that this darkness does not come from this great land of ours, and that it originates from beyond the stars.’

Pitch shifted, uncomfortable, and Gwyn noticed. Then he nodded at Pitch directly.

‘She *also* told me that we would have need of something or someone we would not normally find on this living land that we call our home. Pitch,’ Gwyn addressed Pitch directly, ‘my diviner has said you were once a great warrior. The greatest of warriors against this scourge. Is that true?’

Jack wondered what kind of diviner she was, if she knew all of that; fae diviners were clearly of a different calibre. Even though Jack knew that what she had divined was true, Pitch didn’t seem to know how to reply to the question.

‘Mate, he was once upon a time, but you know as well as I do that he hasn’t been a warrior for donkey’s years,’ Bunnymund said harshly.

‘You think I don’t know about the Nightmare King and his reputation? I wasn’t born in a cabbage patch, Pooka. I’m asking him if my diviner was right. I don’t believe I was addressing you, was I? Pitch, it’s a simple question, were you once the greatest of warriors against this scourge?’

Silence settled at the table. Bunnymund shifted uncomfortably, and North was staring at Pitch. Toothiana still couldn’t peel her eyes off Gwyn. Jack noticed that even when he was direct, there was an uncanny charm about him. Jack didn’t know if the fae had centres, but he was willing to bet that Gwyn’s centre was light, if he had one.

‘I’m not sure if it’s relevant if *thousands* of years have passed,’ Pitch said dryly.

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn agreed. ‘I don’t know how we’ll need you, but the diviner seems to think that we will. I’m not giving up any avenue to defeat this darkness or the current Unseelie reign, do you understand? Is there any more of this metal? How does it work?’

‘It is mined from certain meteorites. To my knowledge, none have fallen here on this planet. It has an ability to repel all forms of living darkness, and will vanquish Nightmare Men and Fearlings. Removed from its scabbard, its presence is enough to turn the living shadows back. They cannot grasp nor touch the metal, and they are repelled by it.’

‘I would like to get my hands on one of these,’ Gwyn said, but he handed the sword back all the same, and Pitch sheathed it with a smooth movement. ‘Perhaps you all should take his ability to touch that sword as a sign that he’s no longer possessed, by the way. I know you’re worried. There is no way he’d be able to handle that beautiful thing if he was.’

Pitch’s eyes widened, and Toothiana looked at him as though she hadn’t considered that before. Just as Bunnymund leaned forwards to disagree, Pitch cleared his throat.

‘With all due respect, Your Majesty, a person is perfectly capable of being sullied by the dark without ever having been possessed by it. Just because the living shadows are gone, does not mean I should be trusted.’

‘What he said,’ Bunnymund said, though he looked a bit bewildered to find himself agreeing with Pitch.

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ Gwyn said with a broad grin. ‘Do you think my life has been all light and sunshine? I’m not throwing any tool out of the toolbox. Do you want to see a world ruled by August Each Uisge? Don’t even get me started on the Nain Rouge. I’m going to be honest, I don’t know if we can do it. My diviner sees many different pathways. She’d tell me if she thought we were going to win.’

And with that he delved back into strategy, actively including Pitch more and more in the conversation; asking him direct questions when it became obvious that he wouldn’t volunteer information himself. After about ten minutes, Pitch was intently participating, using eloquent hand gestures to explain his thoughts, and interacting with the other Guardians like it was something they did all the time.

Jack felt like the odd one out. He hated strategy and studying and research and formal learning. If he couldn’t pick it up organically, or it wasn’t something he was specifically interested in, it went in one ear and out the other.

He settled in his chair, placed both of his feet on the table and then rocked backwards so that the chair was only balancing on two legs. He closed his eyes and leaned his staff against his own torso, settling his hands in his lap.

If they were just going to keep on with their incessant talking, he was going to get some sleep. It wouldn't be the first time. During group meetings over the last three decades, Jack had developed a reputation for falling asleep halfway through, unable to maintain his concentration during reviews, or figuring out a bad guy, or...whatever they talked about.

Bunnymund grumbled something and North laughed.

'What else do you expect? He is being a spirit of fun, let him sleep. We will decorate him like a Christmas tree later, if he's still not paying attention.'

'I expect there to be tinsel,' Jack yawned, and Gwyn chuckled along with North, and then their voices went all serious again and Jack rolled his eyes even though they were closed.

No lullaby better than people talking about serious business.

And he was right, he drifted off not more than five minutes later.

*

The world was falling.

Jack woke up to gravity seizing him as his chair fell backwards. He hit the floor as the chair clattered behind him.

'Wha- Hey!'

He pushed himself up on his hands only to see Pitch standing over him with a mischievous look on his face. It was obvious he'd tipped the chair backwards.

'No. No,' Jack said, pointing a stern finger at him, 'that wasn't as funny as you thought it was.'

'Sleep well?' Pitch asked sweetly, and then raised his hands innocently when Jack stood up, staff at the ready.

'Jack, come now, I didn't do anything you wouldn't do, did I?'

Jack shook his head in exasperation and then looked around the room.

'Where is everyone?'

'They went to see Gwyn out, I do believe your bird of paradise has what you might call an impressive crush on him.'

'He is kinda handsome,' Jack said, 'until he starts talking. And then he's all business, isn't he?'

Jack picked the chair up and it back into the table.

'Anything I should know?'

'I'm being sent on reconnaissance. My ability to teleport through shadows puts me at an advantage, as it always has. And for whatever reason that hasn't yet been explained to me adequately, Gwyn trusts me to actually report back to him.'

Jack laughed, he couldn't help it. He swooped through the room and left snow falling behind him.

'Look at you, all goody two shoes now.' As Pitch glared up at him, brushing snow off his head, Jack started to chant: 'One of us, one of us.'

'I would rather eat glass,' Pitch said, and then inhaled through clenched teeth. 'I woke you to tell you that I shall be heading off immediately. You are welcome – and *please* don't give me cause to regret this – to travel back to Kostroma and stay there. Mora is waiting for you, and the home should keep you out of harm's w-'

'Are you serious? I'm not going back to twiddle my thumbs in some house. I'm coming with you,' Jack said.

Pitch looked at him as though he'd grown a second head.

'You are most certainly not coming with me.'

'Look-' Jack began, but Pitch cut him off with a withering look.

'Perhaps I didn't explain myself clearly enough, because I thought you possessed more than one or two brain cells. I'll try again. I am being sent on reconnaissance. That means that I shall be going directly to the Unseelie Hall to see what I can pick up. I shall do what I've always done rather well, and that's eavesdrop on others and pick up their fears. And if that doesn't work, I shall track down the Nain Rouge. We remember the Nain Rouge, don't we?' Pitch said, deeply condescending.

'No way are you doing this on your own. She took some of my *life force*. I want it back, and I'm coming with you. It's like you've forgotten that around thirty years ago I gave you a pretty big hammering with just some ice crystals and a wooden staff. I can hold my own, Pitch.'

'Only three days ago, the mere act of moving through darkness with me made you collapse like a Victorian maiden in full swoon,' Pitch said.

'And then I slept. A lot. I'm feeling a lot better, and you'd know if I was lying right? Because I'd be...frightened of being found out or something, I don't know. It's important to me. I want to go.'

'I prefer to work alone,' Pitch said, and Jack snorted.

'Firstly, so do I. Secondly, I don't believe that for a second. You tried to recruit *me*, remember? Don't think I've forgotten. That's not something anyone would forget in a hurry.'

Pitch bared his teeth in frustration and then Jack realised that he looked stressed. For someone who was almost always composed, he looked like a trapped animal.

'Is this all because I want to come with you? Because...I don't think it is. What's going on?' Jack said, gentling his voice, wondering what he'd missed in the meeting. Reading between the lines was never one of his strengths.

Pitch didn't respond, though he did force his face into its usual impassive mask, as though realising exactly how much he had on display.

And then Pitch walked away from him as though making a snap decision.

'You're not coming with me, and that's final.'

Pitch walked towards the shadows of the room, ready to leave, and Jack launched after him. He

launched himself at the tall man, and latched his arms around Pitch's back – the sheathe of the sword digging into him – before Pitch could say or do anything.

The world dissolved into darkness. He held on for dear life, feeling far less secure than when Pitch was holding onto him.

Just as quickly, they tumbled out onto the other side of...wherever they were. They seemed to be in a basement of some kind, it was musty and smelled like rat urine, it was as disused and empty a place as any could possibly be. It made Jack feel claustrophobic, but he tried to push that down.

He had to do this. The others wouldn't understand. He might not be able to follow strategy, but he was still powerful, he could still *help*. And more than that, he wanted the rest of his powers back.

'What is *wrong* with you?' Pitch hissed, rounding on him as Jack let go.

'Look, I'm fine,' Jack whispered. 'See? I feel fine.'

'I should take you back right now. Except that you'd probably attach yourself to me like a limpet again, wouldn't you? Do you know what would happen to you if the shadows had torn you off?'

'Something...unfun?' Jack said and then looked around curiously. 'Where are we, anyway?'

'Close to the Unseelie Hall, in an abandoned human establishment nearby. I wanted to get my bearings first. What if I had gone straight there, hm? What if you had landed loudly, and they had known?'

Jack felt like a five year old being scolded. His fingers flexed on his staff and blue lightning shot out briefly at the top of it, reflecting his mood and flashing a pale blue light around the room.

'Just because I'm not good at strategy doesn't mean I'm some child. Don't take whatever you're feeling out on me. Are you acting like this because you don't want to be doing it but feel obligated to? I mean, if-'

Pitch exhaled heavily in the darkness of the basement. It was such a shaky sound that Jack stopped talking, took a step closer, tried to see what he could read from those pale, golden eyes.

There was silence, the kind that came from being under the earth in a small room; almost complete and filled only with the sounds of clothing shifting, of uneven breaths and shifts in posture.

'I find that I am *afraid*,' Pitch said, each word pushing out of his throat like he hated every one. He turned so that Jack couldn't see his face. 'It seems a trifling thing, but it was not an...easy experience for me, when they came down into the dark and took the shadows away. I had almost forgotten, you see, that I had been possessed in the first place. I was so rarely allowed to think about my past that it was as though I didn't have one.'

Jack swallowed hard, he knew exactly what forgetting your past felt like. He felt stupid too, it hadn't occurred to him that Pitch would be afraid of the Unseelie Court. That, just because he had one of the best methods of safely and illicitly travelling beyond enemy lines, didn't mean that he felt safe doing it, or that he was *okay* with it. After all, hadn't Pitch spent almost all of his time down there in the dark after the Unseelie Court came to him? Hadn't the Each Uisge told him to stay put, and hadn't he done just that? If they caught him spying on them...

'What was it like? When they...came?' Jack said, and Pitch walked over to some empty crates and sat down. He still managed to look fully in possession of himself, but Jack could tell it was a front.

‘I honestly would very much like not to think about it,’ Pitch said, and he closed his eyes, shutting the light in them away from Jack, so that he could hardly see Pitch at all. ‘It is a shameful thing, as either Nightmare King or warrior, to be brought so low. And to realise in the same moment that you did have a past, a history, and that you have been brought so low before, by the very shadows and Nightmare Men and Fearlings I had become attached to.’ Pitch laughed, but it was a scathing, cutting sound.

Jack walked closer to Pitch and wished he felt easy enough in his presence to reach a hand out, to offer *something*.

‘But I find that is not the core of my fear. Augus Each Uisge has an ability, a...power. Along with his penchant for drowning, flaying, tearing the living apart, he enjoys having people do what he says. Except that it lives at his core as a power to sway and dominate. The Nightmare King could have resisted it, but I – weakened – could not. Augus told me to stay put in the darkness, until they had need of me. And the strangest thing happened. For years afterwards, I sometimes thought about leaving, but more often, I felt a compulsion to stay.’

‘That’s...not a good power.’

‘It is probably the only thing keeping the Nain Rouge under his sway,’ Pitch said, looking up at Jack and shrugging. ‘She is immensely powerful. She doesn’t like to work in a group, and he has probably told her to, and put some *force* into it. Since disobeying Augus and leaving that lair, I have felt my refusal to follow his order as a chafing that never ceases. I had not thought it could get much worse. But working against him like this, deliberately, has awakened a response that I am finding difficult to control.’

‘Then maybe it’s good that I’m here,’ Jack said, ‘Right? Because I really can look after myself, and you shouldn’t have to go through this alone.’

‘Yes, you are suitably distracting,’ Pitch said, a wry amusement in his voice. ‘I find I do not have much stomach for my own weakness. I am an anathema to myself, in more than one way, I find.’

‘*Weakness?*’ Jack said, ‘Are you serious?’

‘The sooner we get this over and done with the better. I will need you to be *quiet*.’ Pitch stood up swiftly and walked over to Jack, grasping him by the shoulders. Jack tensed under the sudden contact.

‘Ready?’ Pitch asked, and just as Jack started to respond, they whisked off through the dark.

They landed smoothly, and Jack didn’t let his feet touch the floor so he could minimise any sound. He hovered just a little above and then came down slow and silent.

They were in a huge underground hall, lit with strange, unearthly torches that flickered first green, then blue, then green again. The floor was packed earth, years and years of debris and detritus squashed into it until it was a black, shiny surface. The walls, which were easily seventy or eighty feet apart from each other, were formed from gigantic, twisting roots that coiled thickly around one another, giving the impression of clotted, wooden walls. It smelled richly of decay, loam and a sweet musk.

It was also empty of everything except a long, wooden table along with grand, wooden chairs of different sizes and shapes. Jack didn’t know whether to be happy or disappointed.

Pitch held up a hand, cautioning Jack to stay put, as he walked warily forwards.

Jack watched, breathless. He couldn't stop thinking that any moment, someone would turn up, realise that they were there, and all hell would break loose. But the minutes ticked past and no one came, so Jack hesitantly drifted forwards to where Pitch was leafing through some parchment by the head chair at the table.

'I can't read it,' Pitch said, very quietly. 'Can you?'

'Uh,' Jack took a quick look and the words resolved themselves easily. 'Yeah, that's Welsh.'

Jack began to pick up one of the documents, but he was so nervous that the corner immediately edged in frost and he dropped it, not wanting to leave a trace of their presence behind. Pitch helpfully held it up for him with one hand so that he could scan it quickly.

His hopes that the Each Uisge would be arrogant enough to leave all the details of his grand master plan lying around on a table were dashed. Jack looked at each page in turn before frowning.

'I think he wants to control the waterways. You know, people's access to fresh water. Everywhere. It's mostly just a list of names – dams, lakes, rivers, even underground bores and aquifers. I'm not familiar with all of them, it's not like I get down to Australia that often, but, see there?' Jack pointed to where horizontal lines in black ink scratched out the scrawled writing, 'They're the ones he's got hold of already.'

'It makes sense,' Pitch said, putting the parchment down and taking Jack back to the shadows they'd entered from.

'It does?'

'I'll explain later, I don't like this place. The Unseelie Hall has never been pleasant, but it's also – to my knowledge – never been so *empty*.'

'You think it's a trap?' Jack whispered, and Pitch paused, looked around the vaulted hall and then shook his head.

They moved back silently until they were surrounded by the dark. Jack wondered how many years Pitch had spent observing people like this. Snooping around other people's domains was second nature to Jack, it didn't feel wrong, it didn't feel rude, it felt like a necessity. Other people ate food to survive, Jack knew what it was like to have to watch someone else's life to get the same sort of nourishment. Though they were both cautious being in the environment of their enemy, there was no discomfort around the ethics of the act itself.

'The Nain Rouge is next. I have never been to her lair before, so there is considerable risk. Are you ready?' Pitch asked.

Jack's hand drifted up briefly to his neck and then fell down by his side again. He wanted to understand what had happened to him so he could reverse it. If she could suck his power into herself, then maybe – *somehow* – he could have it returned to him. But her heartlessness, her emptiness terrified him like very little else ever had. He looked at Pitch's eyes, dim torch lights in the darkness, and he nodded hesitantly.

Pitch raised his hands slowly and placed them on the outside of Jack's arms, one finger after the other pressing gently down until he was being firmly gripped. The deliberateness of the action made him shiver, and he looked at the fingers of one of the hands curling around his arm. He could feel each individual finger through his hoodie, feel the heat against his cold skin. Would he ever get used to the fact that other beings could touch or interact with him? The fact that it was Pitch

left a breathless feeling somewhere in his lungs, turned his throat dry.

He had no chance to respond before the fingers abruptly tightened, and they were off again.

This time he felt the strain of moving through the darkness, and he fought to keep himself together and silent, because it was imperative that they land silen-

Jack jerked when they landed in the shadows of a dim, abandoned, underground carpark.

The Nain Rouge was *right there*. Only just far enough away that she hadn't noticed them, talking with an older woman with greenish hair and sickly pale skin. They were close, *too* close.

Jack wanted to turn around, to run, to get out of there, and he started to move without realising it. One of Pitch's arms wrapped around his torso, preventing him from moving, and a large, heavy hand pressed itself against his mouth, stopping any accidental sounds from coming out. He wanted to be bothered by it, but he knew that Pitch was trying to make sure he was quiet. Jack was starting to get a sense of how organically Pitch responded to the fear of others, and he felt oddly secure, even if he did just want to get the hell out of there.

The palm was hot against his skin and he swallowed hard, reminded viscerally of the place on his neck where the Nain Rouge had sucked out his life-force. He stared at her, convinced that any moment she would turn and see them, even though they were in the shadows, partially hidden behind one of the many concrete struts supporting the huge structure.

There was graffiti everywhere. On the concrete floor were broken bottles, bits of glass catching the dim light, used needles and other debris, along with copious amounts of uncured, putrid rat, cat and fox skins. Graffiti covered the walls, and it looked like before the Nain Rouge had made it her home, it had been a residence for rough sleepers; those who did not have the privilege of a consistent residence. Jack suddenly felt like he knew what the Nain Rouge had done with all the homeless, and his fear skyrocketed.

Pitch shifted minutely behind him, fingers flexed just enough on Jack's cheek to remind him that he was there. Jack tried to focus on the points of contact, but it was hard. He hadn't been prepared for such a strong reaction to seeing her again. It didn't matter that she couldn't see him.

'Seriously,' the Nain Rouge said, as Jack's fear ebbed enough that he could focus on what she was saying, 'It's his way, Jenny. He's not going to give you your blasted lakes and rivers back. He's got 'em, and he's power hungry! I did *tell* you, but no, you had to go listen to the stupid, charming waterhorse. Now look at you? Stuck talking to me, huh? You don't even fucking *like* me.'

Jenny Greenteeth bared sharp, jagged teeth at the Nain Rouge in frustration and then turned away. From where Jack was standing, he could see living shadows pooled around Jenny like an oily black puddle. The Nain Rouge's shadows were active and unsettled, and he could sense that she had a great number of them. Perhaps the most out of any of the Unseelie Court he'd met so far. Jack could even see Nightmare Men prowling the car park, detached but still connected to her. His eyes darted around, looking to see if there were any close by. It didn't look like it, but the fact that they were wandering around menacingly didn't help him feel any safer.

'He's limited to the water, and so are you, but I'm not. He may have his kelpies and his brother the Glashtyn, but I've made a lot of friends here in the Americas, and I'm tired of travelling to Europe every time there's a stupid fucking meeting. Like, that's just not how we roll, you know? Besides, I have more of these awesome shadows than *any* of us. He won't fucking take them. Coward. You know I'd be willing to share more, Jenny. We can create a lot more, you know. I know how to make more.'

Pitch's breath caught behind Jack's back, and his hands spasmed.

'I like carnage,' the Nain Rouge said, matter-of-fact, 'I like going off book. Don't you?'

'I just want my lakes back,' Jenny said. 'If you can get me my lakes, then-'

'No one gives two shits about your fucking lakes, but if that's all you care about, then fine. I'm not a bullshitter and I don't care about poisoning the waterways to control the moronic humans. They're all just a bunch of monkeys anyway.'

The Nain Rouge whimsically created a swirl of supernatural, green fire. It left a trail of green smoke. A moment later she laughed in childlike delight as she sent a blast of shadow and frost at one of the concrete struts, leaving it wrapped with huge, jagged, broad icicles.

Liquid rage that bubbled up through Jack so that he lost all focus. That was *his*, the Man in the Moon gave it to *him*, it was the only thing keeping him alive.

'That's nifty,' Jenny said, examining the icicles closely. 'It's strong too. Not like normal ice.'

'I'm gonna get me the rest of that,' the Nain Rouge, and grinned at the structure she'd made. 'Think what I could do if I had all of it? That boy isn't going to know what hit him.'

Jack's mind blanked. He hadn't expected a threat like that, he hadn't realised how much the Nain Rouge wanted the rest of his power, and she made it sound so easy to take the rest. The animal fear that pulsed through him when he'd had the nightmare returned with a vengeance. He needed to wake up, he needed to get out of there, to-

'*Jack.*'

The word that pushed itself into Jack's ear was barely even a whisper. And yet realising that Pitch was behind him, that his face was right there by his head, his fear spiralled down to something less mindless. It allowed him to think again, though he didn't like what he was thinking about, and he didn't like seeing icicles caused by a section of his own life-force wrapped around the concrete strut like that. None of that was okay.

He sagged weakly against Pitch, who adjusted his own grip in response. The hand against his mouth gentled, the one that had previously been holding him put loosened. Jack could have gotten away if he'd really wanted to.

There was a clatter of noise nearby, from an upper storey of the carpark. The Nain Rouge and Jenny both turned towards it, and then a moment later all of the roaming Nightmare Men swarmed to the Nain Rouge as she and Jenny walked away from where they'd been chatting, towards the source of the sound.

Pitch let a minute go pass, then another, and then he slowly removed his hand from Jack's mouth. Jack didn't know if he missed the searing heat of that palm against his cold skin, and didn't want to think about it too much.

Pitch's head was still bowed by Jack's, so close that his black hair could easily brush against Jack's if he just turned a certain way. And to his surprise, he wanted to. He wanted to know what it felt like to have his hair brush Pitch's hair. He licked at his dry lips, because this was ridiculous and he wanted to leave and he didn't know why Pitch hadn't just telepo-

He froze when Pitch suddenly pressed his nose into the back of Jack's neck and inhaled deeply. The action sucked the ambient air away from his skin, cooling it, sending a thrill of sensation

through him.

‘Uh,’ Jack whispered, his voice sounding so loud in the stillness, that he paused for a long moment, worried that someone had heard them. But no one responded, and Pitch had inhaled again, and Jack couldn’t let that go. ‘Are you *smelling* me?’

‘Your *fear*,’ Pitch whispered back in a kind of wonder from behind him, dark voice curling up into his ear and making him aware, too aware of how he was pressed back against Pitch, held by Pitch, surrounded by him, and they were there in the dark and Pitch was *warm*. Despite what others may assume, he liked warmth. Summer wasn’t his preferred season, but a burst of sunlight on his skin reminded him of what it was to be touched. And his body responded to the body heat of another, it warmed in response to warmth. Already he felt shivery, absorbing the heat from Pitch, his own body temperature adjusting.

He took a shaky, slow breath as Pitch’s other hand came up and splayed itself over his ribcage. He remembered, too clearly, Pitch saying: *I like the taste of your fear. If you keep offering it up to me so freely, I will take you up on it.* But here? And now?

‘It really is delicious, Jack,’ Pitch said in a drawn out croon, slowly trailing his cheek over to Jack’s ear again, but lightly, so lightly that the contact was a whisper itself. ‘All vulnerable, and...*raw*.’

But what if that was all Pitch cared about? Jack’s *fear*. As soon as it went away, would that be it? Would Pitch suddenly not want anything to do with him? No more of this strange and compelling contact? What if Pitch only wanted to use him, only wanted to-

His mouth dropped open on a silent gasp as a searing wet heat licked up the base of his neck to the curve of his jaw bone, before lips pressed open-mouthed to his skin. Pitch had licked him, actually licked him. It distracted him from his worries, made the hand that wasn’t holding his staff come and clutch at Pitch’s wrist. He tilted his head back, feeling hidden by the shadows, protected by them. Pitch licked at his jaw, brushed his lips over the skin. Jack’s eyes closed.

What were they even doing? He wanted to go, to leave, to be whisked back to Kostroma. But what then? *What then?* Pitch had made explicit something that had been lurking at the edges of Jack’s mind, something he hadn’t wanted to even see. Explaining being good friends with a Nightmare to his fellow Guardians was one thing. Explaining the things he felt when Pitch touched him was quite another. His life was complicated enough.

Pitch exhaled slowly behind him, a hot, wet breath of air that marked the beginning of his withdrawal. He moved his head back, removed one of his hands, straightened. That was it, Pitch was done. He’d had his fill of Jack’s fear and he was done. And Jack, in a moment of madness or desperation, he didn’t know which, turned his head sideways towards Pitch, reached out with his free hand and clutched at the fingers of the withdrawing hand. He was scared, but there was a thrill in his closeness to Pitch that he didn’t want to let go of.

Pitch interlaced his fingers with Jack’s and bowed forwards again, pressed his lips to Jack’s ear and left them there.

‘Shouldn’t we be going?’ Pitch whispered directly into the shell of his ear, and the words were filled with knowing, with promise, and Jack shook his head because this was moving too fast.

‘Why are you doing this?’ Jack replied, flexing his fingers against Pitch’s hand, feeling the contrast between the cool and warmth. Touch like this was overwhelming, made it hard to think. Pitch had been right, he feared and wanted it all at the same time. It made him acutely aware of all he hadn’t had over the past centuries. It made him aware of quick dalliances with other spirits that were

fuelled by a desperation just to be touched, damn it, even if it was only going to be for five or ten minutes, even if it would hurt so badly after it ended, even though it could make the loneliness worse.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, as though Jack had asked an entirely different question, ‘what *are* we doing?’

Jack began to respond when the Nain Rouge suddenly returned, chattering all the while, as Jenny followed behind her. Pitch and Jack stilled, and Jack’s grip tightened on his staff.

‘Y’know,’ the Nain Rouge was saying, ‘we can always find you some temporary digs, a river or a lake nearby. I know it’s not the same, but if you wanna help me out, I’ll help you out.’

‘Augus told me not to trust you,’ Jenny said, curling her greenish hair around a long, claw-like fingernail.

‘Duh, Greenteeth, of *course*. Don’t trust either of us. Were you born yesterday? I’m just saying... who gives a shit about water? Not me. So who’s the most likely to give it back? Think about it, okay?’

Jack wondered what had caused the commotion on the level above them. Hopefully not any humans, since he doubted they’d escape from the Nain Rouge alive.

His eyes drifted around the darkness of the empty, littered carpark as the Nain Rouge and Jenny Greenteeth kept talking.

And that was when he saw them.

Two Nightmare Men, with their swirling black shadowy forms, their glowing eyes, were looking intently into the darkness where Jack and Pitch were hidden. They were walking forwards slowly, inexorably, approaching from the far left. It was not a normal walk, but an intent, unnatural one.

Jack – who had forgotten to let go of Pitch’s hand – suddenly gripped it with icy force, and Pitch turned and saw exactly what Jack saw.

Whether the Nightmare Men had some invisible way of communicating with the Nain Rouge, or whether she just chose that moment to look at them and see what they were doing; she turned with certainty and looked at them both.

Her opaque red eyes widened and then a cruel smile crawled over her mouth, affecting first one side and then the other.

‘Bitches, that’d be about the last thing you’ll ever do. Don’t mess with the wight from Detroit, I say.’

Jack didn’t know what he was expecting as his fear ratcheted once more. For that surge of darkness that had overtaken him like before? Shadow tentacles? A hand around his throat? Magic, maybe? A sword?

Instead the Nain Rouge yanked a semiautomatic handgun out from underneath the uncured animal skin that she wore. Even as the shadows crested forward in a wave towards them, she was shooting at them like a professional. A bullet whizzed right past his head, then several more. The bangs of the gun reverberated amongst the concrete as she took shot after shot.

Jack reflexively hurled a protective wall of ice around them even as Pitch shouted out in pain, jolting hard against him, even as he was teleported back through the darkness.

The Golden Warrior

Chapter Notes

I'm not gonna lie, I didn't know I was capable of an 'evil author cackle' until I put out that cliffhanger and started getting responses. *hangs head* Hopefully there's some content in this chapter which makes up for it.

Ahaha...ha, this chapter was only supposed to be around 3500 words. Pitch and Jack do what they want (It's now over 8000).

As always, thank you *so* much for your kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and your lovely comments!

The darkness pulsed and vibrated around him. There was far more turbulence than usual, and Pitch's grip on Jack faltered just as they tumbled back into the dim light of the kitchen in Pitch's house in Kostroma.

A hard landing. Pitch fell, rolled with the force of exiting from the shadows until he was supine, one palm pressing into his torso above his right hip. His back arched and he tilted his head back, gritting his teeth.

'Oh no,' Jack said, the staff clattering to the ground as he dropped onto his own knees by Pitch's side, staring down where Pitch's hand pressed into himself. 'Tell me you weren't *shot*.'

'I could tell you that,' Pitch said, strained but eloquent as ever, 'But it would be one *whopper* of a lie.'

'Shit, you have got to be kidding me,' Jack pulled Pitch's hand away and saw the blood that was already oozing through the thick material of the robe. He stared in disbelief and frustration, and then yanked the robe to the side, tearing one of the hidden fixtures as he went. Underneath the robe was a black undershirt made of a lighter material, and Jack pulled that up, only to find himself staring at the kind of carnage that the Nain Rouge probably loved.

'I can ice it, we can get to...' where? Where could they get to? Pitch wasn't a Guardian, Jack had no idea what could kill him. And Pitch was invisible to almost all human beings, they couldn't go to a *hospital*.

'Where the fuck do we go?' he heard himself say, voice rising on his desperation.

Pitch coughed weakly and touched his own blood, lifting his shaking fingers to stare at it.

'The shadows made me stronger, it's been so long, so long since I was injured like this. I barely remember what we used to...'

He trailed off and his eyes widened as he looked at his fingers.

'*Pitch*,' Jack said, staring down at the blood that was pouring out of him. There was too much of it, it was coming too quickly. He wondered if he should ice it. He'd iced broken limbs before, those of children who couldn't see him. But this was a gunshot wound to the torso, it had likely affected

internal organs. He felt like an idiot, he had no idea where non-human beings went when they were injured. Did they just die?

His chest heaved as he started to hyperventilate.

Pitch was light grey and clammy, and even as Jack looked back down on the wound again, the blood had spread until he couldn't see much of Pitch's bare flesh at all.

'Pitch, what do I do?' Jack said, hands hovering over the wound, reluctant to ice it. 'Do you have a first aid kit?'

'No,' Pitch said absently, still staring at his fingers like the blood was mesmerising.

'Come on, seriously? You have every other stupid thing in this house.' Jack ran to the cupboards and started to look for a bandage to press into the wound. Maybe if he could stop the bleeding, Pitch could teleport them both, or even just himself to North's Workshop. North would know what to do, wouldn't he? And Bunnymund, he healed plants and tended ecosystems didn't he? He wouldn't let Pitch die, right?

Jack's lips thinned. He was way, way out of his depth.

As he rummaged through cupboards, Mora came into the room, drawn by the fear and the commotion. She whinnied in agitation and Jack turned to her, wanting to offer her some reassurance, but he had nothing. *This can't be happening.* He was not about to deal with Pitch dying on him, he couldn't, there was too much death, and he'd only just lost Jamie...

'This is going to hurt,' Pitch announced suddenly, and Jack whirled around.

'What is?' he said, apprehensive.

Pitch suddenly thrust his own fingers into the wound with such force that Jack gave a cry of horror. It looked like he was stabbing himself with his own hand. Pitch roared hoarsely, his eyes squeezed shut and his teeth ground against each other. His head arched even as Jack scrambled back to his side, grasped his wrist between both of his and tried to pull his hand back out of the wound. But Pitch's wiry strength trumped his, and it was no use. Jack saw his fingers *moving* inside the bullet wound and he almost gagged.

'Are you *mad?!'* Jack shouted. Pitch ignored him, shaking and hardly conscious.

Pitch suddenly withdrew his fingers with a choked off sound of pain, dropping a squashed, blood-covered bullet to the ground. It made a light, pleasant sound on the slate, a stark contrast to the hideous wound it had caused. A moment later he pushed his fingers back deep into the wound, right up to the knuckles.

Jack tried to pull his hand out, convinced that Pitch had finally snapped. There was no logic in pushing fingers into your internal organs. Again, Pitch was stronger than him, even with a bullet wound.

Pitch gasped hoarsely, His whole spine stiffened as though an electric shock had jolted him.

Golden light splintered forth out of the wound. A rich, mellifluous glow, so golden it changed the colour of everything around it. Rays of it touched Jack's hands, and where it made contact, he felt warmth and light, felt imbued with a strange confidence, a feeling that everything was going to be alright. He jerked his hands back, heart pounding up somewhere near his throat.

Mora made a horrendous noise, somewhere between a shriek and a roar, and she tore out of the room as though the Sandman himself was on her heels. Jack hardly noticed, he was so fixated on the light. It made blood look like liquid gold, gristle looked like nuggets dug out of the ground.

Pitch withdrew his fingers from the wound slowly, inch by inch, and Jack couldn't tear his eyes away. Pitch was *making* the light. It spilled forth from his hand generously, lit the bones and tendons from within. It was as though beneath all that black clothing, he was some golden creature hiding behind skin and fabric.

Finally his fingers moved away from his abdomen, and the golden light sputtered out soundlessly from his fingertips, leaving the room blanketed in its dimmer light.

Jack stared down at the bare skin where the deep wound had once been. Aside from a great deal of blood, the skin itself was whole. There was no sign of a gunshot wound anywhere.

'What...did you do?' Jack breathed, pressing his fingertips to the skin tentatively, as though at any moment the horrible wound would re-open and suddenly appear.

'How...?' Jack stared at Pitch, even as Pitch stared at his own hand with wonder.

'I'd forgotten,' Pitch said, voice still strained, his eyes impossibly wide. 'I'd forgotten I could do that.'

'You *forgot* that you could make a light that heals something like a *gunshot wound*?'

'I haven't been able to make it for so long, and I was corrupted, it shouldn't-'

'Do you have other powers?' Jack said, suddenly realising that his image of the Golden Warriors as these regular people with swords was actually probably not accurate at all. These were people born with golden eyes, with a duty built into their genetic imprint. What else was built into the Warriors that were tasked with defending entire planets? His mind broke as it reshaped again, tried to make room for what he'd just seen.

'Do you have pre...shadow powers? Kozmotis Pitchiner powers?' Jack said, leaning over Pitch and staring at him closely. His body hummed with adrenaline, his eyes still flashed with phantom images of the golden light that he'd seen.

'I...' Pitch began, and then his eyes widened as though he couldn't quite believe what he'd done. He stared at Jack as though the answers would somehow just reveal themselves to both of them.

'There were other abilities, yes,' Pitch said slowly, and his expression shifted from wonder into something that looked a great deal like *hope*. Jack didn't recall ever having seen such an expression on Pitch's face before, though maybe he'd come close when he'd mentioned his daughter. The expression was so amazing, so special, that Jack just wanted to take the moment and seal it up somewhere so he could remember it forever.

Instead he did something else entirely. He leaned forwards until he could clumsily kiss Pitch on the lips.

Pitch didn't respond straight away. At first he looked shocked, and then his eyes narrowed. Jack shut his own eyes because he didn't want to see the rejection, didn't want to see anything at all. Pitch's lips were dry, his skin was warm and damp, sheened with a fine layer of sweat.

Jack was just about to withdraw, about to apologise, when two blood covered hands reached up and grasped either side of Jack's head, holding him still. Pitch's whole body oriented into the kiss, and

he inhaled greedily, tilting Jack's head and opening his mouth under Jack's lips, licking his way inside Jack's mouth with a hungry groan.

Jack made a small sound in the back of his throat. It had been so long since someone had kissed him, he'd forgotten how much warmer everyone else was, how they had all this secret heat living inside of their bodies. Pitch's tongue slicking alongside his made him dizzy, and the heat reminded him of what it was to have a fever. It was a shock against the inside of his cold mouth, almost painful, but soon chased away with a settling warmth and a tongue that pressed against his once, then twice, then again before shifting to lick the inside of his bottom lip. Jack wanted to collapse into the sensations that Pitch was creating, wanted to fix his hands in his hair and leave them there for good.

He braced one hand on Pitch's chest and then straddled his torso, making a noise when he realised that Pitch's blood was everywhere and he'd probably have to lift a new sweatshirt and pants. His other hand found its way into Pitch's hair, tugging impatiently on the thick strands. He didn't know what he wanted, he didn't even know if he was *ready* for this.

His life had gotten complicated in an awfully short amount of time.

The hands in his hair shifted so that Pitch's fingers were on either side of his neck, so that his thumbs could move slowly over his cheeks, trace his cheekbones, the underside of his ear, the line of his jaw. The sensations created were intense as they built upon each other. Jack's kissing became uncoordinated as he was distracted by the sensations. A moment later he moved his mouth to the side and gasped several deep breaths, trying to collect himself.

'Too much for you already?' Pitch said, amused.

Jack's eyes narrowed in irritation and he opened his mouth to retort, and Pitch used that as an excuse to pull Jack's head back and bite his lower lip, before sucking it into his mouth. The chuckle that followed pressed its way into Jack as Pitch licked the roof of Jack's mouth with a carnal slowness that made Jack realise he was ridiculously hard. *Already*. He didn't even have the presence of mind to be embarrassed.

Pitch tasted faintly bitter and smoky, and Jack was surprised at how much he liked it. When his own tongue hesitantly pressed forward, Pitch withdrew his to allow Jack more access.

The inside of Pitch's mouth was a furnace, his teeth were not as jagged or sharp edged as he'd often wondered, and he found himself drawn to their texture, tracing them carefully with his tongue. Pitch inhaled through his nose, and then dragged his fingers down the side of his neck until they could grasp his shoulder.

This is happening, this is happening, you are kissing the Nightmare King.

Just like that, Jack realised that he was kissing someone who had tormented children, created Fearlings, the Nightmare Men, brought them to earth, harmed many. He'd destroyed kingdoms. And he *knew* that the Pitch he was kissing was not the same as the Nightmare King who had reigned for so long, but the fear bubbled anyway, and Pitch hissed in appreciation as it came. He rolled them both over until Jack was pressed into the slate floor.

Pitch moved his head back and stared down at Jack with a hunger that made Jack feel suddenly unsure of himself. There was experience in sexual matters, and then there was *experience*. And he was absolutely certain he fell into the 'I know what fucking is, but I haven't done it that much,' category. Pitch didn't seem to be in that category at all.

Pitch pressed his mouth to Jack's ear and licked the outside of it. Jack moaned, his eyes drifted shut. There were multiple fears lurking, vying for attention, being drowned out in Pitch's heat that left him shivery and turned on all at the same time. And one fear dragged itself up and made itself known, Jack was scared of how much he wanted this, he was scared of how much he wanted Pitch. Jack was lying in Pitch's blood and he didn't care, and that recklessness frightened him, because fun could get him into trouble, because it always hurt when whoever he was with left him. And they always left. He couldn't seem to hold onto any connection very long, romantic or otherwise. *You make a mess wherever you go.*

'You don't have to be afraid of this,' Pitch said, low and reassuring. Jack blushed, caught out, and he looked to the side. Pitch shifted and licked the side of Jack's face as he had done in the Nain Rouge's lair. He moved fingers firmly through his scalp, trailed fingernails over his skin, anchored him with touch. Jack moved a shaky hand over the outside of Pitch's arm, feeling the lithe strength there, hanging on even though he wasn't falling. His mouth was so dry.

'Though,' Pitch added, moving back to meet Jack's eyes, 'I would not be at all upset if you were.'

'You like it,' Jack said.

'I *love* it,' Pitch said. 'But I don't need it.'

He kissed Jack with a singular purpose. Jack had never had anyone kiss him with such control before, and it left him weakly grasping at Pitch's shoulder, feeling his mouth warm as Pitch's tongue curled around his. His legs shifted and spread on a blood-stained slate floor. He wanted more, damn it, whatever Pitch was willing to give he was willing to take. He could deal with regret, shame, all the complicated emotions later.

One of Pitch's hands shifted out of his hair, now sticky with blood, and moved rapidly down his ribs to slip under the hoodie, to feel his cool, bare skin. Jack hissed at the heat, and Pitch made a similar sound, trailing sticky fingertips over his flesh. It tickled, but not in a way that left him wanting to laugh. He felt dazed, a small part of him couldn't believe they were doing this, now. In the space of less than an hour he'd realised that their chemistry was a dangerous thing.

And still, he didn't care.

He moaned, thickly, when Pitch brushed the hem of his pants, and wanted to take a breath, but Pitch had his mouth pressed firmly to Jack's, and his hand in Jack's hair. He felt powerless to move.

Pitch's fingers drifted up from the hem back to the side of Jack's head, and Jack made a noise of frustration, kicking at Pitch impatiently. Pitch only responded by pulling his hair so that his head was pressed hard against the slate, and then biting at his lips, at his tongue. The bites weren't hard enough to really hurt, but they still sent a twinge of pain through him, and they made him harder all the same. Whining, he arched, encouraging, but Pitch didn't budge.

And then Pitch tumbled sideways, letting go of Jack's hair as Mora pushed him forcefully to the side with her head. She stepped forward and stood over Jack, protective, eyeing Pitch warily.

'Huh?' Jack said weakly, his voice deeper and raspier than usual. He cleared his throat and pushed himself into a sitting position, grimacing when his erection shifted uncomfortably in his pants. There was cooling blood under his hands, he shifted until he wasn't touching it directly.

Pitch looked as dazed as he felt, staring at Mora in confusion. And then his expression shifted from confusion to dismay.

‘The golden light,’ he said. ‘She doesn’t like it.’

It took a moment, but Jack remembered how she’d galloped from the room as soon as the light had sprung from Pitch’s fingers. He hadn’t realised that she didn’t like it to the point that she’d separate Jack and Pitch, or that she’d have a problem with Pitch. For all this time, she had been drawn to him. Now she glared.

Jack stood up shakily, staring down at his hands, then the floor. His eyebrows raised at the blood, the smears of it. He could feel it matting his hair, cooling on his neck, making his hands tacky.

‘Ugh, I’m a mess.’

He looked up at Mora, who was staring at him, keeping a safe distance from Pitch.

‘What do you mean she doesn’t like it?’ Forming words was hard, coming up with complete sentences was hard, he looked at the blood on the tiling and saw a tiny bullet. He shook his head. Hadn’t this all been caused by them making out in the first place? They wouldn’t have been caught if they’d just *left*. And Pitch had been shot, Jack had been scared he was going to die. Everything had happened so fast.

‘How did you do that light thing again? Where does it come from?’

‘She’s a Nightmare, Jack,’ Pitch said, running a hand through his hair as he answered his first question. He pulled his hand back, glared at the blood and then wiped it off on his robe. ‘She was made by the shadow’s influence on dreamsand. And the golden light, it is primarily used as a...as a weapon. Against the darkness. It wouldn’t destroy her, since her true origins are with the Sandman, but it will hurt her.’ He looked at Mora in appeal and then frowned. ‘I am so sorry.’

‘Can she still stay here?’ Jack said, putting a reassuring hand on Mora’s warm neck and grimacing at the nameless fear that rose inside of him.

‘Of course. But I daresay she will not like me very much.’ Pitch pulled his robe to one side and looked at bloodstains on his flesh and the robe itself, and then thumbed the broken fixing where Jack had ripped the robe open. ‘I should get changed.’

‘Now?’ Jack said, still partially hard, still hoping that that they weren’t about to stop. ‘Don’t you mean like...in a little while?’

Pitch looked up with a small smile.

‘I should, at the very least, report back to North and Gwyn, and let them know about the Nain Rouge’s lack of loyalty, and that we were spotted by our enemies. And I doubt they’d appreciate any more delays, or the *reasons* for them.’

‘You’re not going to tell them why we were delayed?’ Jack said, incredulous. The look Pitch directed at him was withering.

‘Right, good,’ Jack said, taking a few deep breaths and trying to calm himself down. His body still tingled, energy pulsed up and down his limbs. He caught himself staring at Pitch again, wondering if Pitch would just go with it if he flew over there and started kissing him again.

Pitch was staring back at him with a similar expression on his face.

Oh man, I’m in trouble here.

‘Where,’ Jack paused, cleared his throat and dragged his gaze away from Pitch to focus instead on the bloodstain on the floor. That was sobering. ‘Where’s the nearest place I can get some replacement clothes?’

Pitch tilted his head to the side, thinking.

‘I do think there’s some shopping establishments to the east, you’ll find them easily enough.’

Jack licked his lips and tasted Pitch on them, and took a deep, shuddery breath.

‘So...now we just, what? Get cleaned up? See the other Guardians?’

Pitch said nothing, and Jack threw his hands up in the air.

‘Is that seriously what you *want* to do?’

Pitch walked quickly forwards. Mora scattered out of his way and Jack found himself backed up against a kitchen bench, blocked in by Pitch’s arms. Pitch looked down at him, his expression almost menacing. Jack could no longer tell if his adrenaline was trying to communicate fear, or arousal, or both. It left his heart thundering an erratic beat, made him feel weak.

‘What I *want* to do,’ Pitch breathed, ‘is drag you upstairs and have my way until all that frost is fucked out of you.’ Pitch leaned even closer as Jack’s breathing degenerated into something shallow and unsteady. ‘That’s what I *want* to do.’

Pitch’s lips brushed the side of his cheek, and he paused there, his shallow breathing tickling tiny hairs.

‘But one of us has to be responsible. And given that the consequences of us not being responsible is the Nain Rouge getting a heads up on our reconnaissance, and me getting *shot*, I daresay one of us is going to have to exert some willpower over this situation before it spirals out of control. Kudos has to go to that awful brat though, she is a force to be reckoned with. So many wights work with traditional weapons, guns almost seem crude.’

Pitch stepped back from Jack, and stared at the bloodstain on the floor in resignation. Jack stayed leaning against the kitchen bench, his own hands up and bracing himself, willing his erection to disappear and feeling like no exercise had ever been more futile.

‘So it is to be responsibility, as I would not like a repeat performance of this,’ Pitch finished.

‘Responsibility is the *worst*,’ Jack muttered, as Pitch turned and walked out of the kitchen.

‘Tell me about it,’ Pitch said from the hallway.

*

A little later, Jack found a sweatshirt similar to his blood-stained one in an almost deserted store, near closing time. No one saw him, and he was reminded – yet again – that his believers were few and far between. Most of them seemed to be in North America, and over the decades, their numbers had dropped off. It didn’t hurt as much as it used to, because he had believers now, but it awoke that hollow pain inside of him where Jamie’s belief used to live. As he clutched the teal hoodie to his chest, rendering it also invisible, he realised that nothing would ever replace that.

Finding pants was a harder task, and he ended up pilfering a frozen pair from a washing line, easily as overworn and bedraggled as his own had been. Whoever had worn them had forgotten about

them, they had frozen stiff, crackling as he pulled them off the line. He sailed up on the winds with a laugh to avoid a snarling, lunging german shepherd.

Mora trotted in fey, easy circles around him as he stripped down and cleaned himself off in a river so fast-flowing it hadn't frozen over. He scrubbed fingers through his hair, removing dried blood and refreshing himself in the cold. Mora wasn't partial to the near-freezing water, but she seemed happy enough to frolic in the spray that he and the rushing waters kicked up.

When he was satisfied that the blood was gone, he floated up onto the banks of the river and peeled on his new clothing, not caring that he was still wet and the pants were still mostly frozen. Frost worked in his favour, and his wet hair quickly became covered in sparkling ice crystals, before falling off as he rubbed his hand through his already dry hair. Mora snuffled at the new clothes appreciatively, he gasped at the fear she evoked. Since the nightmare she'd caused, he sometimes found the fear she created had a harder edge to it.

He tugged the hood up and over his head and then scratched his hand vigorously against the side of Mora's warm neck. Her back leg twitched and then kicked rapidly at the ground in satisfaction, and he laughed at her, enjoying her happiness. She'd been perfectly fine since leaving Pitch's home, and he hoped that she would still stay there with Pitch.

He looked down at the hoodie and smiled at the frost pattern that had already spread across the cuffs, hem and collar. The patterns changed with each piece of clothing, and he could control them if he really wanted to, but he liked to see the way the frost innately picked its way across the fibres. There was more of it on the cuffs than last time, but otherwise the pattern was mostly the same. The way the frost had a sort of artistic mind of its own, the way he could create that with a touch, they were two things almost always made him smile. It was just cool.

'Well, I think you can understand me, so, I'm going to level with you. I'm going back to Pitch's place, because no one's found us there so far, and, because, uh...' Jack trailed off and chuckled in embarrassment. 'Anyway, Pitch said the light he made hurt you? Do you still want to come with me? Should we work something else out? I'll tell you what, if you just don't want to deal with it, you head back to the cabin and I'll come find you later and we'll work it out. And if you think you can handle it, come back with me and just make sure you avoid that light. What do you say?'

Mora tilted her head to one side as though she was processing what he'd said, but he could never tell exactly how comprehensive her understanding was.

He shot up into the sky, and she raced after him. He hoped that was a sign that she was willing to stay with him, instead of a sign that she hadn't understood any of what he'd just said.

Now that he wasn't focused on finding clothing, his mind wandered all over the events of the past week. Over and over again, it kept drifting away from the serious matters that probably required his attention and ended up squarely in the centre of the mess of feelings that rose up in him whenever he was around Pitch. They weren't simple, though he desperately wanted them to be. In a short amount of time he'd learned that fear fed off the same kind of adrenaline that fun did, and together, they got him turned on faster than he thought possible.

And he'd learned that he *liked* Pitch. But that was a scary thing. He could hardly imagine the faces of the other Guardians if he told them about Mora, and his heart sank when he tried to imagine their expressions if they'd seen him making out with Pitch, in a pool of blood, happier to be there than anywhere else. He didn't want to lose the Guardians as friends and companions, but he wasn't willing to give up whatever budding connection that was developing with Pitch either. And he didn't feel like he should have to. Pitch had saved his life. He'd proven that the changes to his personality were more than a phase, or a trick, over and over again. Even Gwyn didn't seem to

mind him.

But Jack was certain that ‘even Gwyn doesn’t mind him!’ wouldn’t fly over too well as soon as the Guardians learned just how carnal Jack’s interest was.

And he was worried that Pitch was just responding to attention, to the fear that Jack so generously provided. Jack was the first person who had paid Pitch any consistent, positive attention for a long, long time. How would Pitch even know if he genuinely had any appreciation for Jack? There was no way he could know. And secretly Jack wondered if the same was true for him. It had been so long since someone had lusted after him, what if there was a short-term expiry date on their chemistry?

Jack left heavy snowfalls in his wake, stressed and not wanting to think about it, but finding himself unable to avoid the subject as he raced back to Pitch’s house.

Because, damn it, the more he got to know Pitch, the more he was actually enjoying his company. Pitch had a wicked wit, a dry and often dark sense of humour. He didn’t seem to think that Jack had to grow up, or change his behaviour, or stop acting the way he did. He’d opened the window to let the cold, frosty air in when he’d been weak, understanding that Jack did better in a frigid environment. He had no problems with Jack’s body temperature, with Jack’s habit of cooling a room by several degrees wherever he went. He understood loneliness, and loss. Jack knew he had his more sinister sides, could feel the thrill of it whenever Pitch looked at him like he was something he wanted to devour, but it didn’t repel him.

But Pitch was right, they needed to be a little more responsible. Or, okay, maybe a *lot* more responsible. The Nain Rouge privileged damage and destruction above playing nice, and it would only take one misstep for him to find her fingers wrapped around his throat again. And he didn’t even want to think about what would have happened if Pitch hadn’t realised he had that golden light at his disposal. They would have figured it out, wouldn’t they? He wouldn’t have died, surely.

He took a deep breath as he ducked in through one of the open windows in the second level of Pitch’s home. He floated through the house, looking for Pitch, as Mora veered off and settled on her own in one of the many bedrooms. In the end, he dumped his old, bloody clothing alongside Pitch’s bloodstained robe, in a laundry that had been refitted with new appliances.

But he still couldn’t find Pitch anywhere. He didn’t think Pitch would have gone to North’s without him, but he decided it was possible. He had been away for a little while, and Pitch hadn’t wanted to delay reporting back.

He exited the house and then let the wind drop him to the ground, kicking up snow thoughtfully.

In the distance, he heard a distinct shout of frustration cut off halfway through. He turned to it, his eyes widened. *She’s found us!* Images of the Nain Rouge and a bloodstained Pitch returned with frightening intensity.

Jack flew towards the direction of the sound so quickly that whirls of hail followed him, hitting the dense trees with small pings of sound.

And then he stopped abruptly when he came upon Pitch in a clearing, sword out, fighting nothing at all. He had changed into a new robe, this one with silver embroidery on a black background. His hair was slicked with sweat, and his face was taut with a combination of concentration and annoyance. He hadn’t seen Jack at all, focusing too hard on whatever had his attention.

Jack dropped soundlessly into a crouch on a low hanging tree bough, watching as Pitch took a deep

breath and stood up, holding the sword with an ease borne of years and years of practice and competence. And then with purpose, he began to move through a long, elaborate drill. The sword was clearly designed to inflict maximum damage, requiring two hands to be used effectively, shaped for hacking, chopping and cutting, rather than stabbing. It was a huge, heavy weapon, and Jack watched Pitch use it with a newfound respect. Previously, Jack had only seen him use it as a kind of barrier, a threat, but to see him step precisely through the snow, hacking at unseen hordes of enemies, was something else entirely. No wonder Pitch had found it so easy to create weapons from the living shadows, to create his sand-based scythes and arrows. He had the same dancer-like qualities that all good swordmasters had.

But whatever Jack was seeing, it didn't gel with Pitch's view of himself. With a growl of frustration he stopped his drill halfway through and thrust the sword deep into the ground in agitation.

It was in the motion of dragging a hand through his hair and baring his teeth up at the sky that he spotted Jack.

'Hey, don't look at me like that,' Jack said, raising a hand to indicate his innocence as Pitch practically snarled at him. He jumped down to the ground and shrugged. 'Whatever you were doing looked good to me.'

Pitch didn't say anything. He sighed instead and pressed both of his thumbs into his eyes as though trying to quell a terrible headache. Jack had seen highschool students and university students make that same gesture when they were studying for a particularly gruelling exam.

Snow days always helped them.

Jack bent down and made the snowball, blew on it and then hurled it at Pitch's head.

It landed with a satisfying crumble of snow, and Pitch dropped his arms and stared at Jack like he wanted to murder him.

Any moment now...

On cue, Pitch's expression shifted and he let out a small breath of laughter behind a closed mouth. He shook his head at himself, as though trying to rid himself of a fly.

'What do you put in those infernal things?' Pitch said. He looked exhausted, but far less frustrated, and Jack bent down to make another snowball. Pitch watched him warily.

'I dunno. North would call it magic,' Jack said, as he blew on the snowball and looked at Pitch playfully, trying to determine the best place to throw it.

'North cohabitates with giant furry yeti and hundreds of elves who don't make a single neuron between them. You *trust* what he says?' Pitch said, but he turned slowly to watch Jack and the snowball.

'Yeah, of course I trust what he says! You've been inside that Workshop. It's pretty awesome. Besides, I'm alive and back from the dead and my life-force is *frost*, so you know, I happen to think magic is real. I can prove it, if you like,' Jack said and faked hurling the snowball at Pitch. Pitch ducked the fake throw, and then Jack used that time to actually throw it. The packed snow landed right on target, bursting as it hit Pitch's head, and Jack burst out laughing.

'You *fell* for that? There are *dogs* out there who don't even fall for that!'

Jack found it so funny that he fell backwards against a tree and pointed at Pitch in amusement. Pitch straightened, shaking his head again, brushing snow out of his hair. Jack wasn't remotely worried about any genuine anger, because even Pitch wasn't able to withstand the power of one of his well-thrown snowballs.

Jack's laughter died off as he took in Pitch's expression. He always looked so *surprised* to be feeling something good. Jack blinked hard, a sudden bolt of sadness making him step away from the tree. Were good feelings that rare for Pitch? So unusual that he would look so mistrusting of the fun a simple snowball could bring?

'Hey,' Jack said, walking forwards, 'you just looked really angry before, and I thought you were doing really well. No harm done?'

Pitch looked up at him, and then looked over at his sword sticking up out of the snow and hard-packed ground. When he turned back to Jack, he looked speculative.

'Would you...do it again?'

'Throw a snowball at you?' Jack said, bending down to pick up some more snow. His eyes narrowed in confusion, but he shaped it all the same as he straightened.

'Yes, though not yet, if you don't mind.' Pitch walked over and pulled his sword out of the ground with a single, hard tug. 'I've been trying to do something which...might not even be possible. I have to admit that frustration blocks the chances of success, but I was never very patient with myself, and that was well before I found myself shot and your frost in danger of being sucked out by the Nain Rouge herself.'

Pitch spread his legs in a steady stance, and then stared at the sword thoughtfully, before looking over at Jack. He nodded his go ahead with such seriousness, that Jack felt like this was the strangest situation he'd thrown a snowball in. And that was saying something, because he'd created some pretty inconvenient snowball fights.

The snowball landed, dusting Pitch's hair with snow. Pitch hardly reacted. He took two deep breaths, and then stepped gracefully into the sword drill, staring at the weapon with a singular focus.

After about thirty seconds, the sword suddenly flashed brightly. It lasted only a second, but Pitch froze, then dropped his sword like it had burned him. His chest heaved in shock.

'So that wasn't what you were trying to do?' Jack said, frowning.

Pitch bent down and picked up the sword again, staring at Jack, hardly seeing him.

He started the drill again, and within only a few seconds, the sword stopped catching the light and started *emitting* light. Jack gasped. It had the same golden quality as what Pitch had created in order to heal himself. Was that what Pitch had been trying to do all this time?

The light guttered a few times and then suddenly flared up strong, turning the sword incandescent and almost invisible. Pitch changed the grip on his sword slightly, and then made a huge, sweeping motion that cut horizontally through the air.

A huge wall of light, honey-gold and palpable, swung off the edge of the sword and careened into the forest, painting the trees and snow with the colours of sunset as it went. And if that wasn't enough, Pitch continued on with his drill, sending the golden light off his sword, into the forest, a look of fierce concentration on his face with each movement.

He reached the end of the drill and his shoulders immediately bowed forwards, shuddering. Jack launched forwards, because Pitch looked exhausted. But when he reached Pitch, he found that Pitch didn't look fatigued, he looked miserable.

'I shouldn't still be able to do this,' Pitch said hoarsely as Jack cautiously approached, staring at his own sword like it had confounded him. 'After everything that I've *done*. I shouldn't be allowed...'

He looked up at Jack and his features twisted. The anguish was so enormous, Jack felt scoured out just seeing it. Pitch sheathed his sword and then dropped to his knees. Jack dropped with him, wondering what was so terrible about being able to make a golden light that practically sung from the sword like it had always been there.

'What do you mean you shouldn't be allowed to do that?' Jack said, when Pitch didn't say anything.

'We train a long time to be able to make that light. First, we conquer fear to become fear. That awakens in us a darkness that manifests differently for each one of us. And then our training involves a purification. An immersion in the golden light of the stars. It is the pinnacle of our training, learning how to master and then create that light. That light, Jack, it *destroys* the shadows. The Nightmare Men. The Fearlings. It purifies them, it releases those trapped in the darkness and sets them *free*. It is not like the sword, which simply holds the darkness at bay and repels it, which can defeat shadows singly, in numbers that make no difference to the hordes of malevolence.

'The things I've *done*. The darkness I've carried in myself, that I've embraced. Oh, being the Nightmare King for thousands of years for example! There should be no room left in me for that light.' Pitch stared at his own hands in bewilderment and then gave a breath of dismay.

'But isn't it a good thing?' Jack said, trying to understand what he was being told. 'Isn't it like a testimony to your strength, or something, that you can still access it? Doesn't that tell you that you're not as terrible as you think you are?'

'If it's there now, that means it was *always* there,' Pitch's voice turned terrible, each word pulled from some dark, hideous place. 'And if it was *always* there, then perhaps I could have overturned the possession on my own. Maybe I could have fought harder against them. Maybe I just didn't *try hard enough*.' The words were ripped from him with self-directed venom.

'What?' Jack said, and Pitch looked at him with a bleakness that reminded Jack of his own emptiness. It was the look of a man who had been turned absolutely hollow by his experiences, who no longer believed he was capable of anything good. His mind suddenly recalled Bunnymund, passionately telling him: *He has to reckon with everything he's done. It destroys a man, Jack, to even kill one or two people. Pitch has been destroyed by loss!*

'And if that light was *always* there,' Pitch continued, 'maybe I could have fought them off in time to watch Seraphina grow, maybe I could have stopped them in time to become a father again, and not some mon-...not what I became.'

Jack swallowed and stared down at the ground, and then he shook his head.

'That doesn't make sense though. That can't be right, can it?'

'Pardon me?' Pitch said, a hint of his old sinister self lacing through his words, turning them silkily dangerous.

‘No, I mean, just...I mean I’m not telling you that everything that happened is okay. I’m not saying that. But, wasn’t there like an army of you? And didn’t an army of you still fail to completely destroy the shadows? And even if you could *all* make that light, even united, it didn’t defeat them for once and for all, you still had to imprison the rest, didn’t you? There were too many, and they multiply, I mean the Nain Rouge said she knew how to make more and I bet the shadows know how to make more of themselves. They’re never-ending, right?’

‘Which means that...even if you hadn’t been possessed, you couldn’t have overthrown them on your own. And you weren’t fighting against them with your army when they possessed you. It was *just you*. Against all of *that*. I mean, come on, I know you wanted to be the best there ever was and that’s really noble and all, but maybe you should cut yourself some slack?’

Pitch stared at Jack like he was seeing him for the first time.

‘I bet you did try to overthrow them,’ Jack continued, ‘You kept the locket of Seraphina and I bet the shadows didn’t want you to. And...I know that doesn’t excuse what you did. I know that. But I think it’s a miracle you managed to keep any light inside of you at all. And I think that if it wanted to stay alive, it had to bury itself really, really deep, because otherwise it would’ve just gone out like a candle.’

‘You were afraid for me,’ Pitch said suddenly, changing the subject with such speed that Jack actually blinked, ‘before, when I was bleeding out, you were afraid I was going to die.’

It sounded like Pitch could hardly believe the words he was saying.

‘Ah, that,’ Jack said. ‘Well, sure I was. I don’t want you to die, you know.’

They looked at each other cautiously, as though at any moment, the words exchanged could blow up between them and mean something completely different. But then as seconds ticked on by, and minutes passed, Jack realised that he was okay with Pitch knowing how he felt. He was only sad that there were so few people in Pitch’s corner now. Though that probably wouldn’t last, now that he wasn’t the Nightmare King, now that he was some great warrior. Jack had a sudden, awful image of himself in the background, watching Pitch directing some meeting amongst fellow warriors, and then drifting off to be with them, to be with others who understood war and strategy and that single-minded solidarity.

‘Jack, I’m not going anywhere,’ Pitch said gently, and Jack shook his head.

‘Yeah, I know. Especially now that you have that golden glowy stuff on your side. Healing yourself? That’s convenient.’

‘No, I need to explain something to you, even though you’ll probably not believe me. I can’t not be aware of some of your fears. They push at me, because some of them are...about me.’ Pitch looked uncomfortable as he tried to find a way to put his thoughts together. ‘Whatever we’re doing? I’m not going anywhere. Whatever *this* is? It’s not just novelty. Surely you know that.’

Oh. Shit.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know that,’ Jack said, with a bravado that neither one of them believed.

‘You don’t have to believe me. Most fears erode with time, not words, and that is an old truth. But perhaps it may help to know where I stand.’

They sat there in silence for a while.

‘Who would’ve thought it, huh?’ Jack said. ‘Cold and dark really do go well together? Or is that cold and...golden something? Fun and fear?’

Pitch laughed behind a closed-mouth, as always. Jack wondered what it would be like if he *really* laughed, open-mouthed and free. He couldn’t imagine it.

‘So the snowballs helped you, huh? Does that mean I can start throwing them at you all the time now?’

‘It does not,’ Pitch said, soberly.

‘Is it really so hard for you to feel anything...good?’ Jack asked, hoping he was wrong. Pitch didn’t answer, and Jack knew that was an answer in and of itself. Who knew how long Pitch may have struggled with those drills, on his own, if he hadn’t been jump-started by a few snowballs?

Pitch stood up and brushed snow off his robes, holding out a hand to Jack, who was already in the process of bouncing back into the air. He smiled apologetically as Pitch lowered his arm, but Pitch shrugged with a single shoulder.

He turned and looked off into the distance, away from his house and then back to Jack.

‘Are you coming to North’s Workshop? You’ve travelled through the shadows a few times today, and you’re starting to look worn.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, ‘I’ll be okay for a few more, I think? But...I’m going to need to sleep again, at some point. I hate this,’ he muttered, ‘I am going to get my frost back from that creature if it’s the last thing I do.’

‘It may well be,’ Pitch said, taking his shoulders in a familiar grip and whisking them away into the dark.

What Do We Do With Them?

Chapter Notes

I am absolutely blown away by the attention this has received, like, you have no idea. So, you know, I know I say it every chapter but truly - thanks for all of your subscriptions, kudos, bookmarks and very much the comments too!

By the way, I tripped and fell into a [Tumblr account](#).

Jack was tired. The last trip through the darkness had shredded his energy. Where once there had been endless cold inside of him, it now waxed and waned, it required recharging and maintenance. He could feel a discomfort inside himself, a diminishing of snow and ice, and he shifted uncomfortably.

He was sitting at North's huge, round table. Gwyn was there, looking determined as usual, though his light felt off this time, a little more caustic. He'd brought two of his colleagues with him, both water fae.

Albion was the King of the Atlantic Ocean. He was a tall, muscular being with a stern moustache and beard. Everything about him seemed angular, the opposite of the ocean, but Jack found that if he looked directly into his eyes, he could feel the waves, smell the spray of salt, feel the swirl of whirlpools and deep underwater currents. Albion intimidated him, because behind a formal English accent and a reserved way of interacting with others, he radiated an immense, terrible power. He left watery footprints wherever he went.

Ondine, water nymph and Gwyn's diviner, was far less intimidating than both Albion and Gwyn, but more mercurial. Her moods rippled in different directions, and she seemed as bored with the round table meeting as Jack did. Her black hair was constantly wet and tangled, and her fingertips dripped clear pools of water constantly. Every time she caught Jack looking at her, she flicked some water in his direction, and he flicked frost back, so that droplets of ice kept falling between them. Eventually Bunnymund told them to cut it out, but now that Jack had someone else who couldn't stand all the formality, that was never going to happen.

Initially, when Pitch and Jack had arrived at North's workshop, North had summoned the Seelie Court by blowing the tip of a great, white horn. Jack had never seen it before, and North explained that Gwyn had left it there to call him when necessary. It made a strident, piercing call that moved right through him. He'd stared at it in shock, that a horn could make a sound like that.

Right before the round table meeting, Jack turned to North and said:

'Do I *have* to be a part of this?'

'It's important, Jack,' Toothiana said, pressing a small hand to his shoulder and smiling in appeal. North nodded in agreement.

'Yeah, yeah,' Jack said. 'Important. You know I can't refuse you, Tooth.'

She'd nodded winningly, then turned her attention back to Gwyn, feathers flaring. *Yep*, Jack

thought, *that is definitely one hell of a crush*. Gwyn hardly seemed to notice, though he treated Toothiana with courtesy. Jack figured he was so focused on the battle that he didn't have time for romance or noticing when a beautiful Guardian was probably swooning all over him. *His loss*.

But now he wished he hadn't come to the meeting at all. He was in trouble, and it wasn't the fun kind. As soon as he had accidentally let slip that he had been there with Pitch on the reconnaissance, all hell had broken loose.

'Why was he with you?' Gwyn said, looking at Pitch as though he was an idiot.

'I'm afraid he insisted. The sprite of fun and mischief has a way of making his needs known,' Pitch said, spreading his hands as if to indicate that he couldn't do anything about it.

'I wasn't the one who got us noticed, okay?' Jack said defensively, which was *partly* true.

'Why would you do such a thing? We had the possibility of stealth on our side. You shouldn't have even *considered* it. Do you not care about what's been happening? There are humans *and* wights out there who are being forced away from their water sources.'

Ondine nodded seriously, but then tilted her head at Jack as though indicating she didn't mind that he'd gone along. She was the only one, though, aside from Pitch. Even Sandy – who was usually happy to remain a neutral party – had seemed shocked to learn that Jack had gone along with Pitch, flashing several exclamation points above his head.

'Of course I *care*,' Jack said. 'I just wanted to-'

'There's a time for mischief, Jack,' Bunnymund said, firmly, 'and this is not one of them.'

Jack floated out of his chair, staring at all of them, indignant.

'I thought we were having a meeting about what Pitch and I discovered. I didn't think this would be 'gang up on Jack' time. Why don't you all back off and give a guy a break. If I hadn't gone, Pitch would never have been able to read the parchment at the Unseelie Court.'

'I want my question answered,' Gwyn said, sternly, 'why would you go? You, more than any of the other Guardians, know how dangerous they can be.'

'Well, that's why, isn't it?' Jack said, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. 'I want the rest of my life-force back.'

'Jack,' North said, placatingly, 'you already have a great deal of your power left. Perhaps it is time to accept that some things will not come back.'

'Firstly, it's not just 'power', I'm not some power-hungry creature like the Nain Rouge. We're talking about my *life-force*. That's important to *me*. You don't know what it's like. So here's an idea, how about we quit it with the third degree already. I don't answer to *you*,' Jack said, pointing at Gwyn, 'and in case you were thinking of ganging up on Pitch next, don't even bother. I didn't give him a choice.'

There was a pause. Jack was sure that Gwyn would swing into full-blown lecture mode, since he looked like he wanted to. Bunnymund was shaking his head at the table, as though he was so disappointed he couldn't even make eye contact with Jack. Toothiana looked sorry for him. Jack ground his teeth together, infuriated.

'What's done is done,' Albion said, speaking unexpectedly. 'You say that you helped Pitch read a

parchment?’

And Jack nodded, reluctantly sinking back into his chair. Instead of leaving his staff leaning against the table, he held it out with his hand, reminding them that he didn’t want to be messed with.

The worst part was he felt like he deserved it, everything they’d said. Not because he had lingered too long, wrapped up in the moment with Pitch, but because what they said pressed hard on those buttons that he still couldn’t unwire. The ones that told him that he ruined things, that his needs didn’t matter. He felt like he didn’t have a right to be upset that his life-force had been taken, he felt wrong for having made it a priority.

He noticed Pitch giving him a strange look, and refused to make eye contact. Pitch was sitting there like he hadn’t recently been bleeding out on his slate floor, like the Nain Rouge hadn’t threatened to take the rest of Jack’s power.

Pitch cleared his throat and affirmed the Each Uisge’s plans to dominate the world’s sources of fresh water, while ousting every other water wight from their home if they refused to ally with him. Jack’s thoughts drifted. He stared outside longingly, wondering where the nearest town was, and how many kids could be dragged into a snowball fight. He was only half-listening when he heard:

‘The Nain Rouge is fearless. She does not fear anything, that I could tell.’

Jack turned back to Pitch in surprise. He knew, of course, that Pitch had been scoping out the fears of the other wights, but this was news to him too.

‘Everyone fears something,’ Gwyn said, frowning.

‘And that may be true. It is possible to cloak fears using supernatural means, and I’ve experienced that before.’ Pitch shrugged. ‘I don’t think it’s happening in this particular instance. It might go some way to explaining her recklessness.’

‘And you say she has most of the shadows? Great,’ Ondine said in her rich, flowing voice, frowning. ‘What do we do with them, anyway? The shadows?’

‘What’s been tried in the past?’ Gwyn said, staring hard at Pitch. The smile that Pitch offered in return was forced.

‘Generations of military strategy? Armies? Years of training to specifically deal with this foe? Prisons? Weapons forged from rare meteorites? Am I leaving anything out? Dear me, I do suppose we haven’t tried just sitting down and *talking* it out yet.’

No one replied. Gwyn shifted back in his chair slowly, thoughtful. Sandy raised a hand and flashed a question mark over his head, and then pointed at Jack, making a picture of a snowflake. Then he showed a picture of Jack’s staff creating lightning from its point.

‘Yes,’ North said, turning to look at Jack, ‘The frost! Jack, you were able to defeat some of the shadows, remember?’

‘Yeah, and you know what else I remember?’ Jack said, shaking his head, ‘I remember that it didn’t make a dent in any of those living shadows or Nightmares growing in strength, *and*, by the end of it, Pitch had adapted. Right at the end, the shadows weren’t affected by the frost anymore.’

Pitch nodded in agreement, and Sandy sagged down in his chair. Jack wanted to add that for a little while, Jamie’s belief, and the belief of other children, had temporarily helped to quell the shadows. But it had only been temporary, and they had never been truly destroyed. They’d just incubated

down in the darkness until the Unseelie Fae had sucked them out of Pitch. Jack realised that no prison had ever really worked. That nothing had ever really destroyed them.

‘There is something else,’ Pitch said, hesitant. ‘A light that I have recently remembered how to produce. The shadows cannot – as far as I know – adapt to this. Though if you think I’ll be able to make enough of it to fix the problem, you’ve got another thing coming.’

‘Would you show me?’ Gwyn said, leaning forward, curious, ‘I have an affinity with certain qualities of light.’

Jack stared at Gwyn sourly. He realised that he was intimidated by Gwyn, both attracted to and uncomfortable around him. He didn’t like the idea of falling sway to some supernatural charm, enjoyed being able to measure people on their own merits, their personality. But Gwyn, like so many of the fae, possessed natural fae glamour, and came across as more charismatic than he likely was. It didn’t matter how brusque or direct he was, it didn’t matter that he’d practically interrogated Jack about visiting the Nain Rouge, even now Jack could feel a lure, a temptation to spend more time near him, near that light.

Pitch admitted he’d need more space to demonstrate, and North suggested the quality assurance room that they used for some of the larger toys. Everyone got up and followed North, and Jack held back, watching them go. Sandy and Toothiana looked back at him, curiously, but Jack waved them off, faking a huge yawn. He wanted to see the light again, but he didn’t want to risk another lecture, he was tired of meetings.

He drifted up through the centre of the Workshop, heading to the rooms near the top of the large structure. He poked his head inside a couple, before finding one that was filled with an immense, decorated Christmas tree. The tree was huge, poking its crown up through the roof of the room into the room above it. Its branches were correspondingly thick and broad, and Jack balanced himself on one of the lower ones and hooked his staff into some of the nearby branches, before rolling over onto his stomach and folding his hands under his chin.

He had forgotten how *heavy* he’d felt after Jamie had died. The weight and numbness of it was back with a vengeance. He chalked some of it up to tiredness and teleporting through the dark over and over again. But he also knew that some of it had been the sudden panic that Pitch had been about to die. So similar to staring at the ambulance as it had driven away from Jamie’s husband and his children. And that had been quickly followed with an unexpected death, so horrible that Jack hated looking at it in his mind, didn’t want to come to close.

He pressed his forehead into the bough of the Christmas tree and tried to block out the rest of the world. He thought of snow days and frost-edged windows, of gleaming icicles and diamond dust in the high winter sun. But no matter how vividly he called up the things that made him feel happy, his mind kept reminding him that they were all things that Jamie would never see again, would never again experience.

I should have visited him more. Maybe I would have noticed something was wrong.

The small, thin sound that came out of his throat was a surprise, even to him, and he pressed his fingers into the branch. They were all out there, the only people in the world – outside of Mora – who knew him, who had been there for him, and none of them had any idea. And he knew that was on him, he should tell them, but every time he thought about the possibility of bringing it up, someone was always there to remind him how insignificant he was. They didn’t have to say it explicitly, he could tell.

He forced himself to take deep, steady breaths, feeling at the edge of some precipice he didn’t want

to look into. And as he sank into the rhythm of his own breathing, he felt himself drifting off to sleep, and decided that he wanted it. Not just to recover his energy, but for the emptiness.

A short time later, he awoke suddenly, sensing someone else in the room. He pushed himself up, half-thinking that he was back at his home, sleeping in a fir tree, Mora nearby.

Pitch was watching him, the same strange expression on his face that he'd worn earlier, during the meeting.

'They have no idea, do they?' Pitch said, pensive.

'Is this one of those times when I'm supposed to understand what you're talking about?' Jack said, pushing himself upright and sitting cross-legged on the branch. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and then blinked rapidly. He wanted more sleep, but he knew it probably wasn't the best time for it. Outside all he could hear was the sound of toys and toy manufacture, the garbled language of the yeti. It was muted through the closed door.

'The Guardians, they have no idea just how sensitive you are. How raw your loneliness is.'

Jack stared at him, his mouth fell open. The pain that he had been trying to escape before he fell asleep, crept back with rude fingers, pushing at his insides, reminding him that nothing felt right inside of him.

'Can we just...not have this discussion? It's pretty old ground, right? You reminding me how lonely I am? How little they understand? The last time you started a conversation with me like this, Easter was ruined.'

'Touch a nerve, did I?' Pitch said, unperturbed.

'I don't want to talk about it!' Jack said, voice rising, hopping off the branch and walking to the opposite side of the room. 'They're good people, okay? I have friends now, and people who care about me, and people who *believe* in me. I have a home.'

'A home?' Pitch said. 'That shack you're *so* attached to?'

'I don't like enclosed spaces, so sue me. The forest surrounding it is awesome, and I'm used to sleeping in trees. They're comfortable.' Jack ground his teeth together, he didn't even know why he felt the need to defend himself. Ultimately where he slept wasn't anyone else's business except his own.

'And of course they were simply *so* supportive of your plan to join me and potentially learn of a way to get your energy back, weren't they?'

'They were just worried,' Jack said, but he had to turn away from Pitch's perceptive gaze as he said it, because it *had* hurt. He got that they had a way of doing things, that they'd been a clique for a long time, that it wasn't intentional. He had told himself those things for so long, and he did, he *did* believe them.

'And, Jack, if they were such *good* friends, tell me why you spend so much of your time with a Nightmare?'

'Why are you doing this?' Jack said, clenching his hands into fists, feeling the pinpricks of nails in his palm. He felt defeated, bruised.

Pitch frowned and looked at the closed door, as though he could see the Guardians beyond it.

‘They don’t understand who you are. First they ask you to attend a meeting that you didn’t want to attend, and then they lectured you for coming with me, as though they believe you incapable of understanding what’s at risk. And instead of taking *me* to task, which by all rights they should have given my history, *you* were somehow the one who had done the wrong thing? For wanting your life-force back? I hadn’t...expected that.’ Pitch turned back to Jack, forehead furrowed.

‘Yeah, well, it’s not like I talk to them about anything. North doesn’t know how damaged I’ve *really* been by the Nain Rouge. I mean, you’ve seen me pass out and sleep for two days, but he doesn’t know any of that. And Bunnymund has always just had a problem with letting go of responsibility for a little while and having a good time. And Toothiana is great. And Sandy is really awesome. So-’

‘Who are you trying to convince?’

‘I don’t have to convince anyone!’ Jack said, angry, ‘Everything I just said is true.’

Pitch stared at Jack hard, as though trying to see a puzzle from a new angle.

‘Then why are you so *scared*?’

‘You have your wires crossed,’ Jack said, pointing at him with his staff. ‘Maybe it’s *you* I’m scared of.’

‘Do I have my wires crossed, Jack?’ Pitch asked gently.

Jack pressed his lips together and turned away. He did *not* want to have this conversation.

He pressed his fingers against the glass of the closed window, staring out into the white, snowy world beyond. Frost crept up from his fingers, iced the pane, and he watched that instead. He could feel Pitch behind him. It was an acute awareness, and it chafed at him. He wasn’t used to having conversations like this.

‘Did you tell them all,’ Pitch said, softer still, ‘when Jamie died?’

‘Stop it,’ Jack said, weakly. He turned back to Pitch, fingers clenching harder at his staff.

‘Did you sit them down, looking forward to their *empathy* and *understanding*?’

‘North has offered, so stop trying to make them out as bad guys. I thought you were done with all of that. What cause are you trying to recruit me for now, or are you just jealous that I’m a Guardian and you’re not?’

The barbs didn’t seem to hit Pitch at all. His expression was unbearably sympathetic, so Jack stared at the wall, upset and trying to convince himself that at any moment he would beat a hasty retreat.

‘Jack, have you talked to anyone about Jamie’s death?’

‘I told North, but he didn’t really understand, and I didn’t feel like trying to explain, because I was tired and I wasn’t in the mood to talk about it,’ Jack said, shaking his head rapidly, because he didn’t want to be having this conversation. Didn’t he say that he didn’t want to be having this conversation?

‘*Jack*,’ Pitch said, staring at him in disbelief.

‘No!’ Jack slammed his staff down onto the ground and lightning frost burst from it, jagged and

brittle. 'No, you don't get to look at me like that. I'm not some poor, misunderstood creature, I'm not like *you*. If they don't know anything about me, it's because I haven't told them, and that's on me.'

Pitch's lips thinned. Jack realised that one of his barbs had finally hit. The pain in his chest tightened and he stared longingly out of the window again.

'How very *noble* of you to wear all of that *responsibility*,' Pitch drawled, a glimpse of his darker self coming through. Jack's fingers tightened on the staff, as Pitch stepped forwards. 'That's just like you, isn't it?'

'It's not being noble,' Jack gritted out, heart thumping hard. He squashed down his fear of this conversation, of the subject matter, but it kept coming back. It moved through him as a thick dread, relentless and slimy.

'No, it's not,' Pitch shook his head very slowly, 'it's you telling yourself that it's your *fault*, so that you don't have to look at how they-'

The bolt of frost that Jack shot out of his staff was sudden and wild. It hissed through the air, hitting the tree, the ceiling and shooting out at Pitch. Pitch moved his hands up instinctively, and a bright burst of light hit the frost and caused it to shatter in a spray of golden snow.

Jack expected him to be furious, but instead Pitch looked worried, still carrying that sympathy in his eyes. Jack found he couldn't bear it. All this time wanting someone's understanding, someone's concern, and now that he had it, he wanted to get as far away from it as possible.

'When I tell you that I don't want to talk about something,' Jack said, breathing hard, 'I don't mean harp on about it over and over again. I mean I *don't* want to talk about it.'

'I apologise,' Pitch said. Jack was surprised to realise that he meant it.

'All you see,' Jack rasped, his distress not quelled with an apology, 'is how afraid people are. You don't see their love for me. And you don't see what I feel for them. Because you weren't *trained* for that.'

But there was pain in Jack's heart, a pain that reminded him of Jamie, that he hadn't really spoken to anyone about it, that he could hardly stand how guilty he felt about not getting things right with the Guardians. That pain continued to grow inside of him. What had been an aching pressure in his chest was rising to a sharp cramp, and he resisted the urge to press his hand to his heart, to try and hold it in. He'd gotten what he wanted, hadn't he? They were no longer talking about it, and he could just...push it down. Away. They had more important things to focus on, didn't they?

'Jack?' Pitch said, and Jack braced himself for something awful, but when Pitch didn't continue, he looked up.

As he watched, Pitch walked towards him slowly, holding his hands up with the palms facing outward to indicate that he meant no harm. He swallowed around the pain lancing through him, watched until Pitch was only a foot away, so close that Jack could feel the warmth he radiated.

Pitch raised his arm from his side very deliberately. He moved so slowly that Jack was suddenly aware that he was doing it for Jack's benefit, giving him plenty of time to back out of...whatever he was doing.

He frowned when a palm wrapped around his upper arm, warm through his sweatshirt. The contact was disconcerting. He felt overwhelmed, over-sensitive, as though too much warmth and he'd

shatter like an icicle during the spring melt. Behind Pitch, he could make out sparkling snow that still hadn't melted, palely glowing with light. They'd made that.

The hand on his upper arm shifted, curled around his shoulder blade, and finally made its way to the middle of his back, palm splaying. Jack's breathing turned shivery at the sensation. And then Pitch stepped forward to close the space between them, so that Jack's cheek was touching the heavy material of Pitch's robe. So that they were standing length to length, Jack only coming up to his chest, feeling impossibly small.

Pitch completed the embrace by raising his other hand and cupping the back of Jack's neck. It was so tender, so unexpected, that all breath deserted him.

'You don't have to do this,' Jack said, tense, and Pitch's hands squeezed a firm pressure into his skin, a reassuring pressure.

'I know,' he said, seriously.

Jack's head sank onto the robe. The fabric smelled like spices and wood, a faint smokiness rising up from it. He just wanted to forget everything. Pitch's arms around him were warm, the palm on the back of his neck was hot.

But instead of chasing away the feelings inside of him, he found that the enclosed space, the comfort, only made it all more acute. He jerked suddenly as the pain in his chest twisted, and then his free hand came up and clutched at the robe, fisting the material. Jack squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his head even closer, and Pitch responded with a sigh, rubbing Jack's back, stroking fingers through the wisps of hair at the base of his neck.

'Why aren't you telling me it's going to be okay?' Jack said, wincing at how small his voice sounded, frustrated with himself.

'If you want platitudes, go to the others, I'm sure they could pass them out en masse. I don't do platitudes.'

'I just...want it all to stop, you know?' Jack said, voice a little stronger now, which only made the pain more audible.

Pitch laughed a little in the back of his throat.

'I could always knock you unconscious, but I don't suppose that's what you meant.'

The words didn't sound remotely threatening. Jack sagged a little into Pitch, and Pitch stood firm, responding by pulling him closer. He realised that if any of the others walked in, he'd probably have a lot of explaining to do, and he couldn't bring himself to care. He felt drugged on proximity, like it was a feast that he could take his time with. It was strange, alien, and he didn't want it to end.

'How did making the light for Gwyn go?' Jack asked, and Pitch cleared his throat.

'Disappointing. I couldn't duplicate it again.'

'You need another snowball to the head,' Jack said, smiling to himself. There was something so amusing about throwing snowballs at someone who so dignified and in control.

'Maybe,' Pitch replied, but Jack could hear the faint smile in his voice.

‘Does the Nain Rouge really fear nothing?’

‘I wonder that she even has room for it, given the hunger that lurks inside of her. I-’

The Workshop rumbled suddenly, the room itself dimmed. Jack spun and looked out of the window, only to see tendrils of blackness pushing insistently in from the outside.

‘*Shadows*,’ Pitch hissed, drawing his sword even as Jack flew out of the room, opening the door with a bang. He shot off down through the centre of the Workshop, ignoring the chaos, focused only on getting down to the main entrance.

The doors blasted open with such force that one door came completely off its hinges. Several yeti were thrown back, even as the other Guardians were rushing down to meet the living shadows that were cascading in through the massive entrance. Sandy was immediately fighting them off with his sand, and Pitch had teleported through shadow to get to the entrance even faster than Jack had. His sword was out and slashing with a single-minded focus at the Nightmare Men who were already starting to push deeper into the Workshop.

North had his sabres out, but they weren’t effective, and eventually he and even Sandy had to retreat along with Bunnymund and Toothiana, behind Gwyn, Albion, Ondine and Pitch. Even Jack didn’t get too deep into the fray. His ice was no longer effective against the living shadows.

Jack heard the Nain Rouge’s delighted laughter before he saw her. His fear rose, a familiar but uncomfortable flash of terror that made its way through his mind and body. Pitch turned back to glance at Jack, as though checking he was okay, before throwing his efforts into picking off even more of the Nightmare Men. But there were too many, far too many, it looked like the Nain Rouge had brought every living shadow in her possession.

Yeti and elves alike shrieked as the living shadows overtook them. Lights on Christmas trees snuffed out, fires extinguished in their hearths. In almost no time at all, the Workshop was reduced to a dim, shadowy place, filled with silent, voracious masses of shadows, swirling through and attacking anything that got in their way.

They parted for the Nain Rouge, who walked in looking too small to be causing so much destruction. The reek of decay and rot came with her, and Jack choked on it. His neck twinged with a phantom pain.

‘Oh my god, seriously?’ she said, staring at them all in turn. ‘This is it? I was prepared to go all Rambo up in here because you spied on me, but really? What the fuck, Gwyn, I expected better from *you* at least. Does the little baby light warrior find himself a little out of his depth?’ She laughed as she finished the sentence, and then her eyes widened when she saw Jack.

‘Hey there, what are you doing all the way up there? Come down and say hi to me. Be polite!’

Jack dodged a tendril of shadow that shot out towards him and rose higher, keeping an eye out, staying out of her reach. It was growing more difficult, the shadows were creeping up the walls.

The Nain Rouge opened her mouth to say something else and then winced sharply, baring her jagged teeth and turning her head to the side. She started again, and stopped once more, clenching her hands into fists. It looked like something invisible was stopping her from doing what she really wanted to do, and for a moment, everyone watched, unsure of what was happening.

Pitch stepped forwards, lowering his sword, and smiled.

‘You feel it don’t you? The *endless* chafing of disobeying his command? How quickly it becomes

the feeling that you cannot move, or speak?’

The Nain Rouge looked up, outraged, and Pitch shrugged confidently.

‘Ally yourself to the Each Uisge and what do you expect? Did he tell you to leave us alone unless you were in his company? Hm? Order you to behave like a good little girl?’

Several Nightmare Men rushed him at once, and Pitch moved quickly, striking out with his sword and keeping them back several feet. They reached out with elongated arms and fingers, wanting to harm, but unable to twist past the barrier of the sword.

‘How quickly their loyalties shift,’ Pitch said, softly, watching the Nightmare Men with open loathing on his face. ‘Like yours, I suppose. I wonder how happy he’ll be, that you’ve done this. I wonder what sort of consequences there are for betraying a contract with the Silvery King of the Unseelie Court.’

‘I’ve known that waterhorse for longer than you have, Nain Rouge. I know what sort of consequences there might be,’ Gwyn said, grimly. He stepped up to join Pitch, who looked surprised to see him there by his side.

‘Oh, my god, you guys are the *worst*.’ The Nain Rouge put her hands on her hips and stared at them. ‘It’s annoying, sure. But I bet it’s less annoying than how little Jack Frost feels up there, knowing that I have *this*,’ and she spread her hands and created a swirl of snowflakes. She looked up at him and winked. ‘And I bet it’s less annoying than all of you realising at the same time that I’m not really *that* screwed over by whatever the Each Uisge tells me to do. It was a temporary reprieve, dicks, enjoy it while it lasted!’

The shadows surged forward. They became a huge, clotted, swollen mass. Everything turned to chaos in just a few seconds.

‘*Jack!*’ Pitch’s shout was sudden and piercing, and at first Jack thought it was a warning. He looked around, sure that a shadow was about to get him. There was nothing there, so he looked down. Pitch was standing amidst a mass of shadows, holding them back barely with his sword, dancing through the small gaps they were leaving behind.

Jack had a sudden sense that he knew exactly what Pitch was asking for, without being asked. He allowed himself a tiny grin, because he’d understood, because he could *help*.

He made his first snowball quickly, blowing on it and ducking down through the shadows to throw it. He *never* missed. He threw the second one immediately, ignoring Bunnymund’s cry of ‘Now is not the time, mate!’, and focused on making sure that Pitch got whatever pick-me-up he needed. *If you can’t feel good enough on your own, I can definitely jumpstart you.*

Pitch wasn’t even watching Jack anymore, focusing on moving against the shadows. When the first flicker of light shone from the sword, Jack punched the sky in triumph and shot up back towards the ceiling.

The golden light flared strong, spreading out from the sword itself and creating huge lines of light, like crepuscular rays cutting through cloud. Where they touched the shadows, they simply disappeared in wisps of pale smoke, instead of falling back.

‘Is that what you meant?’ Gwyn roared, in the middle of fighting back the shadows himself. He had his own giant, longsword out; but it wasn’t as effective as Pitch’s sword, and Gwyn was mostly working through surprisingly fast, evasive manoeuvres.

Pitch didn't reply, cutting his way closer to the Nain Rouge, who was staring at the light in awe.

'Can I have that? Pretty please?' she said, and Pitch growled at her.

'Over my dead body.'

'*Duh*,' She rolled her eyes. 'That's pretty much exactly what I meant. It's like we're on the same wavelength.'

She leapt forward with the speed of a predator lunging towards its prey, but Pitch stepped smoothly to the side, and Jack sent down a bolt of frost at the same time, distracting her. The others focused their attack on the Nain Rouge, and she stumbled backwards for just a second, and then grinned.

Jack took that as a sign to retreat, that smile was *never* a good sign. He flew up higher, avoiding tendrils of shadow.

North shouted in pain. Jack tumbled in mid-air only to see North on the ground, clutching at a smoking wound on his torso. The rest of the magical green fire that the Nain Rouge had called forth flamed up around sections of the workshop.

He started to race down to North, as Toothiana and Bunnymund went to his side, and found himself hampered by shadows that would not back off from the frost lightning. He stayed there, penned up in the air, horror moving through him.

Pitch redoubled his efforts. There was so much golden light coming from Pitch's sword that one whole section of the Workshop looked like it was permanently lit by a sunset. Whole swathes of shadow were disappearing. The Nightmare Men seemed able to hang on through one or two passes of the light, needing more of it to disappear, but when they did, they transformed into spirals of light before winking out of existence.

Suddenly they retreated. The Nain Rouge left on a wave of the shadows, laughing all the while, like she'd told a punch-line to a joke that only she found funny.

Parts of the Workshop were still on fire, though yeti were rushing around to put them out. Jack could see the limp form of other yeti and elves lying unmoving on the floor. Toothiana was leaning over North, and Jack shot down like an arrow. The Nain Rouge had a nasty habit of attacking his friends and leaving them with what looked like life-threatening gut wounds.

Pitch sheathed his sword and pushed past Albion and Ondine, who were watching North sadly.

'It's the green fire...' Ondine said sadly, and Jack looked at her, eyes wide. She frowned at him. 'The green fire doesn't heal properly.'

'Get out of my way,' Pitch said, staring down at Toothiana with a frown. She flew backwards, shocked. Pitch knelt over North, looking at smoking wound, grimacing at it.

'I can heal this,' Pitch said, looking at North, who was staring at him through pain-filled eyes. 'Do I have your permission to do so?'

North nodded once, in assent, his eyes clouding over with pain. And then his whole body stiffened as Pitch pressed his fingers into the wound, searching for something. Bunnymund reached forwards to grab Pitch by the shoulders and jerk him backwards, but Jack stopped him, holding out his staff and blocking him.

'He knows what he's doing, Bunny,' Jack said, hoping that was true.

Light fanned through Pitch's fingers, moved through North's wound. The smoking ceased, the smell of charred flesh disappeared, making Jack aware of it for the first time. A minute later, North sagged into the ground, pain releasing its grip from his features. A slow smile creased his beard and moustache. His hands came down and touched the space where Pitch's hands were still withdrawing, he shook his head in wonder.

'Who *are* you?' North whispered, and Pitch said nothing, concentrating hard, still working on producing the light.

Pitch stood up once he was done, and though he looked composed, Jack thought he could see signs of fatigue in the corners of his eyes, in the tightness of his mouth. He looked over at Jack as though checking he was still there, and then looked down at the blood on his fingers and palms and sighed.

North stood up and pulled Pitch into a huge bear hug, and then let go in surprise as Pitch pushed his way backwards.

'*What are you doing?*' Pitch said, staring at North with a combination of shock and revulsion.

'Thanking you,' North said, taken aback.

'Next time, try saying *thank you*.'

Everyone stepped back to give Pitch some space, and Jack realised that he wasn't the only one at the end of his rope. Pitch looked uncomfortable, and Jack noticed a tiny tremor moving through his right hand.

North saw the yeti and elves lying still on the ground, and walked over in their direction. Toothiana followed, face falling.

Jack took that moment to hook Pitch's arm with his staff and drag him towards the damaged entrance. The guy needed a break.

Gwyn stopped him with a hand.

'That light, can you teach me how to make that?'

'Teach you?' Pitch said, looking bewildered.

'Maybe you can't, but I'd like to try. My light isn't effective; but yours...I would like to try.' Gwyn looked over at the others and then leaned on his own sword, frowning. 'I'm going to be honest, Ondine says our chances of victory are a fifty-fifty split, but if I can do anything to change those odds, I will.'

Pitch waved a hand to indicate that he agreed, and then stepped backwards, wary, when Gwyn reached out as though he was going to clap him on the shoulder. Gwyn stared at his own hand, like it hadn't occurred to him that the gesture would be unwanted, and then withdrew it.

'Good work, out there,' he said, gruffly, and Pitch inclined his head in acknowledgement. 'But I can also tell when a soldier needs some rest,' he turned his attention to Jack, 'You take him out of here, get him seen to.'

'That's the plan,' Jack said, tugging on Pitch's arm with his staff more insistently.

Pitch jerked his elbow out of the staff with a single, annoyed movement, and then walked quickly

towards the exit himself. Jack followed at a distance, looking behind him at the others as they checked over the injured and dead yeti and elves, helping those that were still alive. Sandy saw them go, and waved sympathetically at the both of them. Jack raised his own hand in acknowledgement.

Once outside, Pitch hiked off around the Workshop, keeping to the shadows. He found a secluded section of wall and sagged against it, taking deep breaths and closing his eyes. Jack knew he'd worked hard out there, fighting the shadows, but he looked like he was paying a high price for it now. Reassurances sprung to mind, but he didn't think any of them would really help, so he stayed standing nearby, watching quietly.

Eventually Pitch's breathing slowed, and he raised a palm to his ribs. *The locket, it's still there*, Jack realised. Just touching it seemed to bring Pitch back to himself, and he looked up at Jack.

'You look tired,' Jack said, worried.

Pitch smiled, though it was more grimace than good-natured gesture.

'As do you.'

'Yeah, but I'm used to feeling tired these days. You look like hell.'

Pitch knelt down and scrubbed blood and charred flesh off his hands with the snow, and didn't say anything for a few minutes. He didn't stop scrubbing at his hands until they were completely clean, and then he rose again, shaking melting frost off his fingers.

'I don't know who I am anymore,' Pitch said suddenly, looking off to the side like he could find his answers out in the distance. He took a huge breath, then another, and then looked at Jack. Jack found he almost couldn't bear the pain that he saw etched into his features, and he frowned.

'Identity crisis, huh?' Jack said, and Pitch huffed out a small, humourless laugh.

'Are you well enough to travel?'

'Yeah,' Jack said, 'Are you?'

Pitch took Jack into his arms, and held on tight as they both melted away into the dark.

You Like a Little Darkness, Don't You?

Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all of your bookmarks, subscriptions, kudos and lovely, lovely comments.

Jack slept long and deep for almost a full day and a half. He roused only occasionally to shake off a small nightmare or turn over on the giant bough he'd selected as a bed. There were plenty of fantastic, huge trees near Pitch's house to choose from. He hadn't known how tired he'd been until he was back in Galich, Kostroma, with Mora nearby and some cold air around him.

Pitch, too, had slept. Jack didn't know how soon he settled after Jack had fallen asleep, but he was still sleeping after a day and a half had passed. Spirits and non-human beings did not need to sleep often, but when they did, it tended to be in long chunks that paid no attention to the rules of Circadian rhythms. He flew up to the balcony of Pitch's room and stared in through the window at Pitch sleeping in his bed. He was only going to check that Pitch was okay, but stayed, hand pressed against the glass and feeling like he was seeing something secret.

Pitch's face in rest was peaceful and clean of stress. His mouth was open a little, and he looked...oddly vulnerable, Jack realised. He could also see changes that he hadn't really taken the time to absorb before. Pitch's skin was less grey than it used to be, his nails were pinker, and the shadows under his eyes were less smudged; as though the shadows had not only possessed him on the inside, but on the outside as well. His coarse hair which often behaved itself during the day, kinked up in every direction while he was sleeping, and Jack smiled.

He left a smiley face in the frost by the window, and drifted down to the snowy ground. Mora came down to join him, and he made a stripe of frost down her back, watching her with a smile as she turned her neck to try and see it properly. After a minute she let it go, and pushed her muzzle into the snow near Jack's feet.

He was grateful for the sleep, but he felt unsettled. It felt like he'd been jumbled up and not put back together very well. His playfulness had a harder edge to it, his skin felt itchy and over-sensitive.

If he thought about what had happened with the Nain Rouge at North's Workshop, it started to feel so huge that he couldn't look at it anymore. Like staring at the sky and trying to see all of it at once. And he found himself strangely worried about Pitch. He couldn't stop thinking about the look on Pitch's face when North had hugged him, how shocked and horrified he'd been. He might not be able to read someone's fears like Pitch did, but that had not been someone comfortable with the idea of being thanked for saving someone's life.

And now that he thought about it, he realised that Pitch had never liked Jack bringing up the fact that he'd saved his life as well. He'd stopped mentioning it, because Pitch had asked him to quit talking about it.

I suppose if you've been around for a few thousand years, you get to whatever the square root of having issues is.

He didn't want to think about anything at all. If he thought about Pitch, he first remembered how awesome it was to have crawled on top of him in all of that blood and found himself kissed until he couldn't quite remember what it was they were supposed to be doing. The fact that there was so much blood involved and that he hadn't really thought about it at the time, made him realise that he maybe had a few more problems with impulse control around Pitch than he'd realised. Which was saying something. He'd *always* had problems with impulse control.

And then, after remembering that, he couldn't help remembering how unerringly Pitch had verbally pressed against the sore places inside of him. Bringing up his feeling of estrangement from the Guardians, the fact that he hadn't talked to anyone about Jamie. Pitch had a power to hurt him which went beyond the standard jibes of villains and into some new territory that left him weak and wary. He'd always wanted someone to pay attention to him, but he hadn't realised it could *hurt* so much. People who paid attention could see what was really going on, and he hadn't taken that into account.

The fact was, he didn't quite know where he stood with Pitch, and he didn't know what to do about it. Seeing him looking so innocent in sleep hadn't helped at all.

'I'm feeling a snow day coming on,' Jack said to Mora, and she perked up immediately, her ears pricking forward, and her tail lashing the sky.

They both whisked off into the air, and Jack laughed as he went, finding snow and a cloudy day to be a welcome distraction.

*

He came back a few hours later, found his way into the house through an open window. Pitch really didn't seem bothered by the cold, as he often had windows of the house wide open to the snow and frost, even as he had a fire burning in one or two of the hearths.

He found Pitch in a sitting room, writing the strange Lunar alphabet into a small, yellowed notebook with a well-worn leather cover. Pitch looked up when he saw Jack and then continued writing, paying him no attention.

'We're never going to talk about it, are we?' Jack said, and Pitch blinked once at his notebook.

'Us kissing?' Jack added, as Pitch continued to deliberately writing in his notebook.

'Because,' Jack continued, flushing, 'if that was just some kind of post-almost-dying make-out fest, I'd like to know now, so that I can be there for the next time you nearly die and then heal yourself.'

Pitch huffed out a breath of air which could have sounded – to the uneducated – like annoyance, but Jack grinned when he realised it was laughter. Pitch continued to look down at the notebook, continued writing, but there was a quirk to his bottom lip that made Jack want to knock the table over, freeze the notebook, and to hell with being polite about anything ever again. *This is not normal, these are not convenient impulses!* Hurriedly, he tried to change the subject.

'What are you writing?'

'It's an old exercise,' Pitch murmured. 'It helps to clear the mind. I have been brainstorming ways of dealing with the shadows, since that seems to be my job now.'

'All work and no play makes Pitch a dull boy,' Jack said, trailing frost along one of the overstuffed armchairs and sending sparkles of it into the dry air.

Pitch paused and looked up, considering. His eyes followed Jack as he moved around the sitting room in a lazy, hungry way. It made Jack uncomfortable, despite how bold he'd felt, and he avoided eye contact, pretended that the small original etchings around the room were fascinating.

Jack was just about to make up some excuse to leave now that he'd accidentally stumbled into uncomfortable territory, when there was a sharp rap at the front door.

'Does anyone know we're here?' Jack said, thinking immediately of the Nain Rouge, and Pitch frowned.

'Humans can't come here.'

He rose smoothly and walked down the main hall. Jack followed, looking around quickly, expecting shadows to come crawling through the cracks in the doors and windows at any moment.

Pitch opened the door and there stood August Each Uisge, hair slowly dripping water onto the front step and almost looking innocuous, were it not for the fact that he almost constantly radiated malice.

'May I come in, please?' August said, his voice smooth and light.

Pitch pretended to consider his nails.

'You're bound by the old laws of the land, aren't you? Can't come in without an invitation?'

'It's always worth a try,' August said, spreading his hands as though indicating that he couldn't quite help himself. 'The old laws dictate that I can't compel you to let me in, either. You wouldn't want to offer a man a spot of tea?'

'I would be delighted to offer a man a spot of tea. But,' Pitch said, lowering his hand and staring hard at the Each Uisge, 'you are no man.'

'Got me again,' the Each Uisge laughed easily. Jack's fear crept up incrementally, because this was too calm, too civil. *What the hell is going on?*

'You won't come outside then, and join me for some conversation?'

'What are you doing here, August?'

'I did warn you, you know,' August said softly, his voice turning menacing. 'First you disobeyed a compulsion. Now you are actively working *against* me. I did say that if you stepped into our affairs, I would kill you.'

'Actually, I seem to recall that what you *actually* said, was that if the *Guardians* left you alone, you would let them keep their – oh what did you call it again, it seemed so apt – their twee, quaint traditions. I don't seem to recall a direct threat against me at all.' Pitch sounded as confident as ever, and he talked with August like he'd known him for a long time. He didn't even seem surprised to see him at his door. Jack hung back, staff ready just in case, disturbed at how easily they were talking.

'Besides,' Pitch added, 'don't tell me that debacle with the Nain Rouge was a result of your direct command? Seems particularly messy for you.'

'Well,' August said, leaning against the doorframe, pretending relaxation. He pressed against the threshold a little, testing its strength. He couldn't move past the threshold, inhibited by an invisible

barrier, much to Jack's relief. He didn't buy this casual tête à tête at all. 'Well, no, I suppose she didn't listen to me. She really doesn't like being spied on, you know. Apparently. Who can tell with her, she does make the rules up as she goes along.'

He smiled to himself, like that was a private joke.

'Perhaps if I just put you both down now, like dogs, she'll come to heel.'

'Tsk, tsk, pony. You know better than that,' Pitch said. 'What will you do? *Talk* us to death? I believe from where you stand, there's not a great deal you can do to us.'

'Such flippant words coming from you, my dear Pitch,' Augus looked up with his limpid green eyes and offered a sharp-toothed smile that promised nothing good. 'So *lofty* now that you have your frozen fan club.'

He looked past Pitch's shoulder as though seeing Jack for the first time, though he had obviously known he was there. Jack felt paralysed in that stare, seeing bottomless lakes and the terrible depths of whirlpools. And then, coasting at the end of that, like an unexpected wave breaking the rhythm on the shore, he felt a soothing sensation, like gentle waves lapping at his feet. He floated forwards without thinking, and then stopped, startled, when Pitch put his arm out.

Jack shook his head, dazed, coming back to himself. He was surprised at what he'd done, what he'd felt persuaded to do. Augus hadn't even *said* anything.

'Still sore that I wouldn't join you, all that time ago?' Pitch said, less playful, more serious.

The Each Uisge offered a close-lipped smile but something dark shifted behind his features. It was a terrible sight. Something inhuman crept forth and seemed to peer out behind his eyes, but a moment later his bones and skin settled again, he seemed humanlike once more, though he was dripping water rapidly now. A steady drip, drip, drip on the already wet porch.

'*Come outside, Pitch,*' Augus said, and even Jack felt the solid compulsion, a hook behind his heart. He took a deep breath, trying to push the voice out of his mind. Pitch didn't move.

Augus laughed at that, a sound that started off human and then became deep and terrible, echoing as though they were in a cave.

'Learned how to shrug it off, have you? That's *interesting*. Never mind.' Augus brushed one of his clawed, bare feet against the wooden porch, over and over again. It reminded Jack of a horse pawing the ground, with just as much restlessness in the gesture. Augus looked up over Pitch's shoulder and smiled winningly at Jack. He was beautiful, Jack would give him that much.

'So, my little sprite,' Augus said. 'You, then. *Come here.*'

Jack lurched at the force of the compulsion. He'd thought it had been hard to shrug off when it had been directed at Pitch, but it was nothing to the blank feeling that entered his mind upon hearing the words. He didn't even have room for fear. There was only the sense that it was right to obey, a lassitude that removed all other pathways from his free will and left one remaining. He was locked into green eyes, felt only that everything would be alright if he could just reach Augus.

He struggled weakly when he felt two hands on his shoulders, fingernails digging painfully into his skin, and then heard a noise of protest when a hand on his chin forced his eyes away from Augus'. The moment the new pair of eyes met his, he felt a sudden, thought-stopping fear that crested so suddenly that he gasped and sagged, going limp in Pitch's grip, skin crawling.

He tried to look away from Pitch's gaze, but Pitch had him just as hooked in as Augus had, and he

made a thin noise before he could stop himself. At that, the fear in him abated, as though Pitch had turned a dial down inside of him. His mind cleared, he saw pale golden eyes more clearly, he could see the repressed concern on Pitch's face. Pitch's fingers lifted off his shoulders and Jack moved backwards, refusing to look at August.

Even though what Pitch had done left him wanting to claw the fear out of him, it had done its job. The compulsion had been snapped, though he still felt it inside of him. Like a paper note that had been ripped in two, but still carried the same, persuasive message.

'Ah, but will you always be there, Pitch?' August said, a self-satisfied smugness lacing its way through his voice. 'You show your cards too plainly, and have grown too confident. I am not as powerless as I once was, when I first met you. And I am no Nain Rouge, to be as impulsive and prey to my own wild appetites. I can wait for what I want. Do you think that I don't remember that you turned me down? You have slighted me before. And I *never* forget.'

Jack made a face, shaking his head in disbelief, looking up in spite of himself.

'Geez, hold a grudge, much?'

'You,' August said, his gaze holding a vague sense of promise, 'you are a pretty little thing, with that wild look in your eye. I would like to *break* you, I think. Would you like that?' He paused, waiting for an answer, and then raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. 'No? I could make you like it.'

It suddenly hit Jack, how right North had been when he assured Jack that the Each Uisge was just as dangerous as the Nain Rouge, but in a different and more calculated manner. Part of him wanted to retreat, to hide behind the door. He annoyed that all of these Unseelie fae thought they could walk all over him. He snapped his staff, and a bolt of frost lightning zapped out from the tip.

'That was positively adorable,' August said, unperturbed.

The smile he offered Pitch was chilling.

'The only reason the Nain Rouge hasn't shown up on your doorstep, blasting you both to Mars, is that I left her with an order so *exacting* that she dare not trespass against it. She is not so invulnerable as she would like to think. And the only reason I have allowed that, is because you are *mine* to do with as I see fit. You do not belong to her. I made you a very generous offer, especially given all that once passed between us; and no one ever turns me down.'

'I did,' Pitch said.

'And so I intend to make an example out of you. Though whether I do that now, or after I've executed my other plans, will rest and turn on how you choose to behave from here on out. Consider it a peace-offering. Maybe I shall allow you a few more weeks to do as you will, before I come for you. Maybe I shall turn up again tomorrow, whispering Frost's name, coaxing him from this lovely home, knowing that you'll follow.'

Pitch shifted uncomfortably, and August smirked. Jack tried to imagine a world where August Each Uisge and Pitch as the Nightmare King had aligned their forces together. *Nope, that would not be a good world.*

The burst of golden light that Pitch sent forth from his hands was unexpected. It lit up the doorway, hit the Each Uisge squarely in the chest, passed through him and ricocheted off into the outdoors.

Instead of being driven back as the Nain Rouge had been, August pressed a hand to his chest and

laughed. It was a free, wild laugh, high-pitched and fey.

‘That might work against your shadows, but that will never work against *me*. I am come from the land, born of the deep watery places and the twisting, tangling waterweeds. I am not of your shadows, and I did not see the need to bring them with me. Are you such a coward now? Attacking a friendly waterhorse from behind a threshold he cannot cross? Or perhaps just intelligent. I have always respected that about you. But, please, don’t waste your energy. I was only here to offer you my olive branch, as it were. Do think about it.’

Augus bowed deeply, his straight black hair and the waterweed that grew from it tumbling about his face. He rose again and then tilted an invisible hat at them both, before turning and walking calmly down the steps. Pitch and Jack watched him as he headed down the path and then cut off into the forest. It took minutes for him to disappear. He didn’t look back once.

‘We’re not safe here,’ Pitch said, closing the door with a sharp click. ‘That was no olive branch.’

‘More like a demented olive branch.’

‘It was an *improvisation*,’ Pitch hissed. ‘He came here to get himself invited in, or compel one of us out there, so he could rip us to shreds with his bare hands.’

‘What?’ Jack said, eyes widening. Pitch looked at him with a contained fear.

‘Woah, so not used to you looking like that,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘What does he have against you? Seriously, it’s just a grudge? Seems like more than a grudge to me.’

‘We...’ Pitch trailed off and his mouth thinned in frustration. ‘I vaguely remember there was something, a long time ago. I was malicious then, darker, and I came across him somehow, and you’ve...seen him, he’s not unpleasant to look at. But it’s-’

‘You and *him*?’ Jack said, incredulous. ‘As in, oh my god, are you saying he invited you to the Unseelie Court because you know, you were, you were *both*, I mean, you can cut in and tell me I’m wrong at any time.’

Pitch stared at Jack looking abashed and Jack stared back.

‘How long did the *something* last? How did you even...what was your flirting like? Oh, god,’ Jack raked a hand through his hair, ‘I can almost imagine it, and it’s like the worst thing that’s ever crawled through my head. I’m serious.’

‘If you’ve finished being hysterical about this,’ Pitch said uncomfortably, folding his arms, and Jack laughed.

‘I haven’t even *begun* to be hysterical about this. You had a relationship with a horse,’ Jack said, torn somewhere between horror and the urge to tease mercilessly.

‘Not *while* he was a horse,’ Pitch said, and then turned around, waving Jack off like he was nothing more than an annoying insect. Jack followed, trying to imagine Augus and Pitch *together*.

‘Wow, I mean, I’ve heard of holding grudges and not getting over something and hanging onto the past, but he really takes the cake, doesn’t he?’

‘It’s...every fae is peculiar in some way, I’ve found. Gwyn often cannot be jocular to save his life. The Nain Rouge is consumed by hunger as she consumes. The Each Uisge cannot be denied without seeking vindication. I denied him.’

‘Why? You both would have been unstoppable,’ Jack said, as Pitch pulled the strap carrying his sheathed sword over his shoulders. He watched as Pitch took a canvas bag from a drawer, like he always knew it was there, and started to wander around the house, putting things inside of it. He picked items from drawers and shelves in different rooms like he knew exactly where everything was placed.

‘I was arrogant, I preferred to work alone. Also, I do not clearly remember most of what passed between us. Perhaps there are...other things in our history. I am not sure. I believe one of my parting statements to the Each Uisge was something like, ‘I do not like to mix work with pleasure.’ It didn’t go down well.’

Jack shook his head in slow disbelief. Pitch seemed done with the conversation, and so he went off to find Mora. If they were going to beat a hasty exit, he wanted to make sure she was going to be okay.

He drifted off through the house and found her sleeping standing up, head drooping, cloaked in the shadows. As he approached her, she awoke, stamping her feet, and then pressed her head into his chest, happy to see him. He did his best to ignore the fear, rubbed her cheeks with his hands and blew a smattering of frost onto her forehead so that it formed a temporary blaze.

‘We have to leave, okay? I know you’ve just woken up, I’m sorry,’ he said. But she followed him placidly as he made his way back down to Pitch. She didn’t seem bothered by the sudden change in events. Pitch already had the pack slung over his other shoulder.

‘So where are we going?’ Jack said, frowning.

‘As much as it pains me to say it, I think North’s residence may be best. It’s fortified, and it’s the only place where we’ve forced a proper retreat from the Nain Rouge. The downside – aside from the fact that North, and the yeti, and those miserable elves live there – is that because the Workshop itself is not technically a home, the Each Uisge can enter the non-living areas of it easily. Loopholes in fae law, very inconvenient for us.’

‘But the living spaces are okay?’

Pitch nodded.

‘The upper floors should be fine. I hope.’

‘You *hope*?’

‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re running out of options. I am not leaving you here for August to come back and whisper you through a window, which, judging by the way you were so *easily* compelled, would happen in less than a minute. I do not fancy watching you every minute of every day.’

‘I don’t know if *you*’ve noticed, but I don’t like being cooped up indoors. Maybe I’d be better off going my own way, sleeping on rooftops, in trees, that sort of thing.’ Jack’s fingers moved on his staff and he shifted, restless already at the idea of having to be constantly surrounded by four walls. ‘That...thing you said, about the Each Uisge tearing us apart with his bare hands. That wasn’t you exaggerating, was it?’

Pitch shook his head. Jack swallowed. The idea of the aristocratic, refined Each Uisge having enough violence inside of him to tear someone’s flesh apart until they were dead made his stomach drop. He realised that he hadn’t been taking the Each Uisge seriously, because the Nain Rouge was

such a constant, unpredictable threat.

‘And then he may eat you.’

‘*What?*’ Jack said.

‘He’s a carnivorous waterhorse. He prefers to eat human flesh, but I believe he might make an exception in this case. He will tear you apart with his bare hands, leaving everything but a perfectly intact liver, which usually floats to the surface from whatever underwater lair he’s using at the time. Everything else? He eats.’

‘He *eats* people?’

Pitch nodded matter-of-factly, like it wasn’t a greatly disturbing piece of information.

‘And you *dated* him?’

‘I wouldn’t call what we did dating.’

‘Ah, I guess that makes it okay then,’ Jack said, laughing, because he couldn’t help himself. Pitch shrugged, like the whole situation wasn’t nearly as creepy as Jack thought it probably had been.

Jack looked over at Mora, wondering what he was going to do.

‘Will you come with us?’ he said, turning to her, putting a hand on her muzzle. ‘I know you have to be careful, but there are places near North’s where you could hide. I don’t like the idea of you hanging around here. He has all the other Nightmares, I think. Unless...you want to be with them?’ Jack frowned at the thought. Maybe she would prefer to be with her own kind?

But she slipped her muzzle past his hand and pressed her forehead to his chest in a familiar gesture. She whickered gently against him, clearly wanting to stay with him. Jack knew that he was going to have to tell the Guardians about her, even though he didn’t know how he was going to begin that conversation. He couldn’t imagine being without her, couldn’t imagine not sharing snow days with her or waking up on a tree bough to see her nearby.

‘Follow behind us, and I’ll come find you, okay? Just...be careful.’

*

It was amazing how quickly North, the yeti and even the elves had returned the Workshop to its former glory in only a few days. But the yeti were twitchier, and North was less about wonder and more about fierceness, wearing his sabres constantly and staying in close contact with the Seelie Court. Though he didn’t talk about it explicitly, the loss of several yeti in particular pained him. They were his companions, he talked to them, understood them, and he had lost close friends. In moments when he thought no one was watching, Jack saw grief steal over his face.

When North realised that Pitch and Jack needed a place to stay, he reacted with a combination of concern for their wellbeing, and happiness to have more company. His attitude towards Pitch appeared to have completely changed since Pitch had fought the shadows off and healed him. He kept trying to draw him into conversation, asking him about the healing light, about his sword, about his fighting technique. Pitch was clearly uncomfortable, and seemed to prefer it when they were at odds. As soon as his room had been allocated, he’d disappeared to spend most of his time in there.

Jack trailed after North on the second day. He observed as North moved from the quality assurance

rooms, to the kitchens, to the toy manufacturing floors to oversee what the yeti were doing, to visiting injured yeti to chat with them or simply hold their great, furry paws in silent commiseration.

Later, as Jack was helping North carve ice sculptures by using his fingers to shape some of the finer details, North cleared his throat.

‘Jack, you are seeming to be spending a lot of time with Pitch.’

Jack felt his stomach clench, but he nodded absently as he brushed his finger over an ice-mermaid’s hair, watching curls appear as the unwanted ice simply fell away.

‘I suppose so. You believe that he’s not evil, now, right?’

‘I have a healed, whole belly to prove it,’ North said, patting at the round belly with a gleam in his eye.

‘He could use a friend,’ Jack said, quietly. Because he didn’t want to talk about what more they might be, and he didn’t even know if they *were* friends. If he had to categorise their connection to each other, he’d probably have to start with ‘I have no idea’ and finish with ‘but I don’t mind it as much as I probably should.’

North nodded as he drew forth the mermaid’s hands with tiny chisels and hammers, showing a delicate understanding of the ice. Jack watched him for a little while. Watching North work was incredible, and he envied his skills.

North didn’t continue the conversation, though Jack couldn’t tell if he was truly happy with the answer he’d received or if he’d just decided to leave it for now. Could he tell there was more going on? He was a pretty savvy guy. But he also thought of North has a kind of over-protective father figure at times, and he’d just assumed that if North could tell that more was going on, everyone would know about it.

Jack sighed and flicked his hands over the tail, making ice drop off and leaving a perfectly formed, translucent ice tail in his wake. He was bored. Why make ice sculptures inside when you could make huge icicles outside?

He left North deep in concentration and wandered up through the Workshop.

Jack was already starting to feel cooped in. It chafed at him. Walls everywhere. The constant navigation of hallways and platforms and tables and chairs and furniture and doors. How did people do this all the time? Why did they want to?

And the heavy weight inside of him, the one he preferred not to look at, kept pressing at him. Every time he looked at it, there was something else to consider, something new and freshly painful. He decided it was best to pretend it wasn’t there. But pretending it wasn’t there was getting harder.

The next few hours he became increasingly edgy. He iced the floor so that two yeti slipped and fell, roaring and sending him out of the toy manufacture rooms. He froze a couple of elves and made a general nuisance of himself until finally he burst in on Pitch’s room, only to find him sitting down, reading some heavy Russian tome.

‘So bored,’ Jack announced, and Pitch looked up at him, eyes narrowing.

‘Caged in and cooped up?’ Pitch elaborated and Jack grimaced, he didn’t want to be reminded.

‘Yep.’

‘Just because you have no concentration span doesn’t mean I was put on this planet to entertain you.’

‘Nope, you were put on this planet to turn everything to shadow and darkness,’ Jack said, the jibe coming out harsher than he’d intended. Pitch’s eyes widened, as though he had just realised what mood Jack was in. He stood up, placing the book down gently. ‘How’s that working out for you?’

‘Do you want to *play*, Jack? You really want to play this game with *me*?’ Pitch said, and Jack’s teeth ground together.

Yes, he thought, because I am going to go stir crazy in this stupid, loud Workshop that’s fun to visit but not so much fun to stay in. Give me white vistas and huge skies and the quietness of snow falling and not all this chaos and colour.

‘How do you just sit up here like this, reading?’ Jack said, and Pitch didn’t reply. A moment later he walked past Jack and closed the heavy door that Jack had left open. It muted the jarring noises of the Workshop. He turned the lock with a click, and then stayed by the door, staring down at his hand on the lock.

‘You seem like you could do with a distraction,’ Pitch said.

Jack was too busy icing the wooden floor, his mind spreading in multiple directions, trying to reach everywhere and for everything except for the heaviness that pressed at him. He was letting tiny fragments of floating ice shake out of his fingertips when a large hand grabbed his shoulder and fingers dug into his skin, forcing him out of his mental haze.

Pitch pushed Jack back against the wall with a single hand, which became one finger pressing hard into his sternum. Jack stared up at Pitch in surprise. The expression on Pitch’s face was more sinister than usual.

‘Patience is over-rated, and you are in a *mood*,’ Pitch purred, and Jack’s attention suddenly went from scattered to focused, his breathing turned shallow.

‘What do you want, Jack? A distraction? To not have to *think* anymore?’

Jack’s breathing almost deserted him, because it suddenly occurred to him that Pitch had locked the door.

‘Yes,’ Jack said, shaky.

Pitch’s finger trailed down the centre of his sweatshirt, creating a line of sensation as it went. And then hot fingers moved under the hem, spreading hungrily over his bare skin. Jack made a sound that was shocked and wanting, forced out of him on an exhale. The touch only made the itchiness of his skin grow, made him feel like he was too big inside his flesh.

The fingers curled up against his skin until Pitch’s palm was resting hot on Jack’s chest, a burning point that bent all of Jack’s concentration in its direction.

‘Do you know what I’m offering?’

‘Y-yeah,’ Jack said, ‘I’m not an idiot.’

‘That remains to be seen,’ Pitch said, smug, and pressed Jack further into the wall until he felt

trapped. Jack started to defend himself and Pitch swallowed whatever words he was about to say with his lips and tongue. He tasted of his own natural, faint bitterness and cinnamon cookies, and had obviously been thieving them from the elves at almost every opportunity. Jack's eyes slid shut, he let Pitch slide the staff out his grip with his free hand and rest it against the wall, nearby.

Jack's cold tongue stroked Pitch's, who responded by slicking his tongue along Jack's with an easy, controlling confidence. The hand on his chest reached up and traced along his collarbone, rucking the fabric and exposing more of his torso. His free hand came up and grasped Jack's hair, holding him still, not that Jack was interested in going anywhere. But still, the sense that he was trapped against the wall by Pitch became more complete. It made him feel, oddly, less caged in, more able to see through the chaotic strains of his own thoughts.

When Pitch's palm brushed against his nipple, he whimpered. Pitch smiled against his mouth and repeated the gesture. The palm became fingers and then fingernails trailing over his sensitive skin, and he gasped into Pitch's mouth, shuddering against the wall.

He grabbed onto Pitch's robes with both hands, pulling Pitch closer, even though he was already close, even though there was hardly any closer left. But Pitch responded, one hand feathering gently through his hair, the other mapping out his ribs, the soft skin leading down to his hips, back up again over his sternum, before splaying back up to his collarbone. There was no blood on the floor this time, no Mora, but there were elves, and yeti, and *North*.

Jack moved his head to the side and Pitch let him, using the opportunity to bite gently at his jawbone. Jack shivered as wet, slick heat traced its way up to his ear, he tried to *think*.

'We can't do this here, someone will know,' Jack gasped, looking sideways and expecting an audience of elves to be watching them. They were tiny and seemed to have the ability to appear underfoot at the most unexpected moments. 'Those stupid elves will see us.'

Pitch let his hand slip out from under Jack's hoodie, and Jack felt like slamming his head back against the wall. *What the hell am I doing? I don't want this to stop!*

But neither did Pitch. Instead of withdrawing his hand completely, he traced a hot palm over Jack's hip-bone and then continued south, curious fingers trailing down the top of his thigh through the fabric, so close and yet not quite close enough. Jack groaned and his neck arched, impatient.

'You like a little danger, don't you, Jack?' Pitch said, voice deeper than usual, with a sureness that went straight to Jack's gut, made him harder, turned his thoughts to fragments and vowels.

Jack shivered, swallowed thickly. Pitch took the silence as an answer, and palmed Jack's hardness through his pants, smiling darkly. Jack moaned, his head thumped backwards against the wall, his hips moved unconsciously forwards.

'That's what I thought,' Pitch breathed, and Jack cried out when the palm became a firm pressure, almost painful against the constraints of the fabric, tracing him with firm intention.

The hand in his hair clenched suddenly, and Pitch kept his head back against the wall so he could kiss him firmly. His other hand dexterously undid Jack's fly and moved the zipper down. He stroked fingers through Jack's pale, pubic hair, just out of reach, and Jack made a sound of frustration that started out as a whimper and then drifted off into a whine. He'd be embarrassed, but Pitch didn't seem to mind and it wasn't like Jack could stop. He rapidly dissolved into a shivery, feverish pool of sensation, hardly aware of anything except Pitch, his warmth, the sensations coursing through him.

When Pitch finally took him in hand, his gasp escaped, a shocked, raw sound. Pitch's hand was so *warm* and he was so sensitive he almost couldn't stand it. And suddenly he wanted Pitch inside of him, he wanted to be burnt up from the inside out, to be consumed, and he whined when Pitch's hand began to move slow and confident, learning the length of him, lingering at the head.

'I want you to fuck me,' Jack managed, voice strangled. 'Come on.'

'I have to say,' Pitch said, amused, a voice smoother than it had any right to be, 'I'm simply charmed that you think you're calling the shots.'

'*Please*,' Jack whimpered, choking when Pitch nuzzled the wound on his neck. It didn't hurt, but it was so strange, so intimate, that his mind almost blanked out.

'*No*,' Pitch whispered. 'You wanted a distraction, and I am providing one.'

Jack opened his mouth to reply, but was silenced by the hand in his hair moving down to cup his cheek tenderly. He turned into the palm, hardly able to believe this was real. He was so close, already, embarrassingly close. The fingers on his face gently smoothed over his skin, in stark contrast to the firm, steady hand moving between his legs. It had been so long. People didn't touch him like this. No one touched him like this.

Something twisted hard in his heart; a sudden, unexpected flash of pain. He made a sound that was half-wanting, half-anguish. Pitch's thumb ran over his cheek, smeared wetness, and Jack hardly noticed, too focused on the building furnace of heat that Pitch was creating. His hips were moving constantly into Pitch's hand now, one of his hands had slipped under the robe but couldn't find a way through the undershirt to Pitch's bare skin. He scraped his fingers down the fabric covering Pitch's chest in frustration. Pitch groaned, shortly, and bit Jack's lip, before sliding his tongue deep into Jack's mouth, spreading warmth throughout him.

He was so close, but held on, his hands clenching into fists. Every time this happened, *every time*, it only ever happened once, and he couldn't bear the idea of letting go of this so quickly. If this was going to be the only encounter he was going to have with Pitch of this nature, he wanted it to last, damn it. He was so afraid that this would be it, because he was just some scrawny, winter spirit, and he hadn't expected it to be so good. He wanted it to-

'Jack,' Pitch whispered, and Jack whimpered, because even hearing his name in that tone of voice was impossible, was too much.

Tremors started to rack his body, and he squeezed his eyes shut, because not now, not now, he wanted it to *last*, and-

Pitch's hand increased in speed, his thumb twisted over the head of him, and everything turned white in Jack's mind as he jerked forwards, crying out, coming hard. Pulses of cold lightning moved through him, even as the heat of Pitch surrounded him, kept him in hand, stroking him through it.

Jack sagged against the wall, but Pitch kept him pinned up against it, mouth returning to claim his, hot and possessive. Jack made a high, thin noise, and Pitch moved the hand from his face down to his chest, keeping him up against the wall. Jack was kissing wetly now, lax and clumsy, drugged on the sensation of Pitch's lips dragging against his.

When two, come-covered fingers pressed into his mouth, next to Pitch's lips, he moaned thickly. He tasted himself on Pitch's fingers, cold and icy. His tongue licked between the crease of Pitch's fingers, and Pitch's breath stuttered against Jack's mouth. Jack realised, distracted, that Pitch

hadn't come yet, and Jack moved his arms weakly down Pitch's torso, hungry for it, wanting.

Pitch withdrew his fingers from Jack's mouth and moved his hand down between them, taking one of Jack's hands in his own and entwining their fingers. Jack felt Pitch's fingers, sticky and cool from his own saliva, and sighed at the intimacy of it, pressing his head just underneath Pitch's shoulder.

Pitch moved their hands down beneath the undershirt, behind cotton, until his fingers, caught between Pitch's, wrapped around a hard, burning length. Jack inhaled at the sensation, and Pitch hissed.

'Cold,' Pitch gasped, and Jack flinched, his hand drew back, because people had complained before about the cold. But Pitch's fingers tightened between his, forcing them to stay. 'But it is definitely *not* a problem.'

Jack's curiosity got the better of him, and he brushed the pads of his fingers on the hot, soft skin beneath them. And then Pitch took control, moving both their hands in a firm, rapid rhythm, drawing Jack's arm into the movement, Jack's fingers pressing down alternately, surprised at the intimacy of it. He didn't know what he'd expected it to be like with Pitch. Intense, definitely, but intimate? He liked being able to discover what Pitch liked, in this way, how he gripped himself harder than Jack would have, how his fingers flexed at the head.

Pitch's breathing went from shallow to unsteady, his hand moved faster, and Jack felt his own body tense in anticipation.

'Come on,' Jack said, quietly, intense, 'Come on, come *on*.'

Jack tightened his own hand, forcing the pressure through Pitch's, and Pitch made a hoarse sound that ripped right out of him. He arched forwards, his whole body pressed Jack's back into the wall, and his other hand reached up and hit the wall beside Jack's head. Jack was surprised at the intensity of Pitch's release, which was marked with a silent trembling, hot stripes of fluid painting his cold fingers, Pitch's hand clenching his with a knuckle-bruising strength. Jack gasped in time with Pitch, he couldn't help it.

There was a moment where both of them breathed raggedly, Jack's eyes wide open, and Pitch looking down between them. And then Pitch withdrew his wet fingers from Jack's and stepped back, discomposed. When Pitch looked up at Jack, his expression was as shattered and surprised as Jack felt.

Pitch walked over and picked up a handkerchief, cleaned himself efficiently, and then handed the clean side to Jack, who followed suit, feeling awkward.

What just happened?

He did up his pants, pulled his hoodie back down so that it settled more comfortably, ran a hand through his dishevelled hair.

'Uh,' Jack said, looking over at his staff and taking it in his hand, using it to brace his weight. He still felt weak. 'Well, I guess that was fun,' he said, defaulting to what he always said after encounters like that. *That was fun, see you around*.

'What are we doing?' Pitch said, and Jack closed his eyes, because they'd been asking each other some version of that question for long enough now, and they still didn't have an answer.

'You started it?' Jack offered, and Pitch took a deep, bracing breath.

They stared at each other for a long moment. Jack felt like the world had tilted again, but instead of feeling even more jumbled, something inside of him had clicked into place. There was no escaping it now, no hiding behind the tatters of other thoughts. He *liked* Pitch. The idea that he would not be allowed that intensity again, that connection, was a physical stripe of pain through his body. He could not rip the thought of Pitch's trembling out of his head, of the way his breathing changed before he was about to come, the taste of cinnamon and bitterness in his mouth.

Pitch looked away, as though he couldn't stand to look at Jack anymore, and then he paced the floor. Jack didn't know how he managed all that movement, he felt completely wrung out. His whole body was still tingling. He could feel the ghost of fingers in his scalp, he could feel Pitch's hand interlocked with his hand, hell, he could still feel the movement of their wrists as a dull burn in his arm. He was still warm in places, his body temperature had not returned to normal.

'I feel like...' Jack began, and Pitch stopped and turned to watch him, 'I keep waiting for some voice to tell me that this is *wrong*. I keep...thinking that it wasn't that long ago, that you were the worst, I mean the *worst*. And I keep waiting for this to stop, and for everything to go back to how it was. But the more time goes by, I just, I just stop caring about all of that. And I keep thinking maybe that's me, you know, maybe because I'm all about fun and not giving a shit about responsibility and I can't actually make an intelligent decision to save my life and-'

'Jack, I say this with all due respect, but that self-perception of yours is *wrong*,' Pitch's expression turned grim.

'I can't stand the fact that I don't worry about you being evil half so much as I'm scared that you...will get bored of me. Or, be done with this. Because how insane is that? I mean, how *crazy* is that? Right? That instead of worrying about you know, the implications of you and me and how *they* are going to react, I'm worried about you changing your mind.'

'Didn't I say I wasn't going anywhere?'

'Didn't you also say I probably wasn't going to believe you?' Jack said, on a weak laugh. 'I mean, I don't just mess things up, Pitch. *I* am messed up.'

'Then we have a club of two,' Pitch said.

'No one else is going to understand,' Jack said, laughing. 'They're going to think that you brainwashed me, or that I fell for some trick, or something. And they're going to figure it out. So if you want to, if you want an out, then I think you should take it-'

Pitch made a pained sound in the back of his throat, his face twisted. Jack stopped talking.

'You are so *afraid* of that,' Pitch said, bewildered, walking towards Jack. 'Why?'

'People leave,' Jack managed, when Pitch reached him. He looked up at Pitch and then looked away, staring at some fixed point on the floor. 'I mean, people meet me, and then they like me, or they think I'm cute, or...something, and then we fuck, and then they generally leave. Some of them tell me I'm too cold for their tastes, as well, which is kind of understandable, but that's a whole other kettle of...'

Jack trailed off when he caught the expression on Pitch's face.

'Have you ever had a relationship with someone?' Pitch said. He looked horrified.

'Your mind-reading fear-thing can't pick that up?' Jack said, frowning. Pitch shook his head slowly and Jack shrugged. 'Okay, then, well I guess it depends on your definition of a

relationship.'

'You haven't, have you?' Pitch forced the words out, like he couldn't believe what he was saying.

'I said, I guess it depends on your definition of-'

'Then you haven't. Because my definition is clearly different to yours. I happen to believe that a one night stand is nothing more than a one night stand. Maybe I've been doing it wrong all this time. Please, regale me with tales of all of these meaningful, special one night stands that you've had that have lead you to feel so secure.'

'Actually a lot were during the day,' Jack said, voice small.

The sigh Pitch gave was long-suffering.

'Is it a problem?' Jack said, and Pitch raised a hand and trailed it down Jack's arm, pensive. Jack shivered.

'I had mistakenly assumed that your fear was not so grounded in reality, but no, it doesn't have to be a problem. I can keep reminding you, if you like. I am not going anywhere.'

Jack smiled to himself, because he liked hearing it, because Pitch – for all of his composure – seemed to have no problems allowing himself to be open like this. Maybe it was a side effect of being aware of everyone else's fear, the whole world just started to seem a lot less threatening.

'Come join me with my reading, if you're so bored,' Pitch said, straightening, extending his hand.

Jack took it, and let himself be lead back to the armchair. He hopped up on one of the armrests as Pitch settled himself down and opened the giant book once more, reading the yellowed, Russian writing.

'Fairytale?' Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

'Research. If the golden light can't hurt August, then something else can. Once, I thought I knew what it was, but...I seem to have forgotten.'

Jack yawned hugely, and leaned his head into Pitch's shoulder. It was warm and comfortable, and like this, being cooped up indoors didn't seem like such a bad thing. None of the hurts inside of his chest had gone away, but they were muted, he didn't feel quite so on edge.

'Are you falling asleep?' Pitch said, as Jack began to drift off. Jack nodded sleepily as Pitch turned the page. He thought Pitch was going to answer him, but he didn't. So instead he watched the heavy inked pages turn until he drifted off, one side of his body warm where it pressed against Pitch, and the other side pleasantly cool.

In Which the Sandman Encounters a Nightmare

Chapter Notes

This fic is over 200 kudos! It's got like... comments and stuff! My eyes do this O.O every time I look at how many hits it's had. My goodness.

Thank you all so much for your continued reading, lovely kudos (and an extra squish for those who have gone to offer kudos again only to find out they've done it before! I know what that feels like!), and the wonderful, wonderful comments.

Jack woke to warm fingers carding through his hair. He sleepily blinked himself awake and realised that only a couple of hours had passed. Pitch was still reading. It was still daylight; though the sun was beginning to set. The door was still locked. His body felt strangely lukewarm, and Pitch's body hadn't cooled at all. He radiated heat. It was a strange sensation, but not unpleasant.

The touch itself was like a drug. Pitch's fingers seemed to instinctively seek out sensitive places, even as he turned pages with his other hand and was – in all other ways – engrossed in what he was reading. A thumb lingered on the small ridge of his skull behind his ear. An index and middle finger traced a firm, hypnotising line down through the middle of his head to the base of his neck, making him shiver. His index finger moved back up again to trace his hairline. Jack discovered that he had a sensitive forehead, and inhaled with surprise. At that, Pitch repeated the gesture twice more, and Jack's eyes closed.

'Still feeling caged in and cooped up?' Pitch said, his voice directed at the book as he turned another page.

'It's not as bad,' Jack admitted.

'Are you alright?' Pitch asked, and from the serious, low tone, Jack knew that he was talking about what they'd done. His body felt tuned into Pitch, it was sensitive to the fingers still moving through his hair, to the fact that this was happening at all. He still couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen. That Pitch would get up, shake him off, change his mind.

'I want to do it again,' Jack's voice was rougher than usual. He was embarrassed, and turned his head away.

'We will,' Pitch said. Jack leaned his head back into the touch and Pitch hummed in the back of his throat, as though happy with the action. When Jack did it again, Pitch's fingers traced his ear. He resisted the urge to turn his head back, to push his head into Pitch's shoulder and leave it there, warming his face.

'Who would have guessed that you would be kind of sentimental and...like this?' Jack said, and the hand in his hair stilled. Jack worried he'd said the wrong thing. Pointing out how Pitch was not the Nightmare King actually made him more uncomfortable than when people treated him like he was still evil. But after a beat, Pitch's hands shifted, stretched, and then continued to move through his hair.

'Mm,' Pitch said. 'There's a few things about you I missed as well.'

It was Jack's turn to tense.

'There is?' Jack said, a trace of apprehension causing Pitch's fingers to pause once more.

'I find it hard to believe none of the spirits you encountered didn't want a relationship with you. So I think I've discovered something, about you and your fears.'

'I'm not going to want to hear this, am I?' Jack said, rolling his eyes, but reluctant to move. He was comfortable. He was enjoying a rare moment when his body temperature was higher than usual, because of someone else, because they were close to him and they'd stayed close to him.

'How long have you been leaving spirits before they left you? How long have you just chosen to beat them to the punch?' Pitch said, and Jack folded his arms around his middle.

'Long enough,' Jack said. 'Are you saying it's my fault that I haven't been in any, in anything that lasted longer than a day or a night?'

'I think it's complicated,' Pitch's turned towards Jack, though he kept reading. But Jack could feel the attention, the focus.

'I just want to know,' Pitch said, turning another page like he was making idle chitchat. 'In the beginning, before you learned to reject before you were rejected. Did any of those first spirits, the ones who *did* leave you first...Did any of them hurt you?'

Jack swallowed. His body tensed more, and his fingers clamped around his sides. He was definitely too close for this conversation. He didn't want to be talking about this. He shifted an inch, and Pitch's hand tightened in his hair. It didn't hurt, but Jack knew Pitch wanted him to stay. He knew that Pitch wanted him to stick out the conversation.

But Jack did not find it easy. He'd learned how not to think about things, he had walls and boundaries and lines in place that he didn't cross in his own mind. There were unpleasant memories, and the knowledge that the feeling of being rejected never went away even if he was the first one to say, 'See you 'round.'

'It's not like what you're thinking,' Jack said, defensively. 'Knowing you, you're probably assuming the worst. It wasn't like that.'

'Then why is it your way to assume, so completely, that people will leave? I have this theory,' Pitch closed the book quietly, and left it as a heavy weight in his lap. 'Correct me if I'm wrong, but it just became easier to leave without even waiting to see if they-'

'All the spirits?' Jack said, incredulously. 'What did you think I've been doing all this time? How many hook ups do you think I've had? You make it sound like I *just* came from some random...thing, when actually, there's been no one in the past thirty five years or so. I don't bounce from spirit to spirit. I'm not like that. I don't know why you all assume I'm like that. You're not the first, you know. And anyway, how many encounters have *you* had? We've already established that you were hot for like... one of the most evil things I've ever met.'

Pitch sighed, and then his hand started to move through Jack's hair again. It was so tender, so reassuring, that Jack squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head away. How could Pitch be so gentle, when the conversation was so hard? His own fingers tightened on his ribcage.

'I've made you defensive,' Pitch said. 'You still haven't answered my question. Did any of those first spirits hurt you?'

‘Not like you think,’ Jack insisted.

Pitch waited, and Jack took a deep breath, thinking back to those initial encounters. The first sexual encounter he’d had, was also the first time he’d been *seen*. What an experience that had been. It had happened too long after the Man in the Moon had roused him. Years had passed and he had not been in his right mind. He had assumed he was an only ghost in a world of ghosts he couldn’t see. And when he’d first met that satyr, and...

‘My first encounter was with a satyr,’ Jack said. Pitch’s body tensed next to him, and Jack decided to ignore it. There was no way he’d be able to talk about it otherwise, he just needed to push the words out and be done with it.

‘I was just so *happy* that someone could see me. That anyone could see me. I didn’t know what a satyr was. I didn’t know about other spirits. Until then I’d just thought of myself as some kind of ghost with magic powers or something. I didn’t know what to do with myself. So the satyr could see me and I just, I just *went* with it. The satyr, well, you probably know what they’re like, being so well-travelled. And it wasn’t bad. It wasn’t like rape or anything. It was fun and pretty overwhelming, and you know – fast.

‘It’s just that, well, I embarrassed myself. A lot. At the time, I didn’t know that satyr don’t do relationships. They just kind of romp around and do whatever the hell they want, and relationships aren’t a part of that. Which I didn’t know. They don’t even really want friends. And I couldn’t handle him just going on with his life and while I was expected to disappear again. I couldn’t, I mean, I wasn’t like I am now. Not the well-adjusted, functional frost spirit you see before you.’

Pitch huffed out a laugh, accepting the self-deprecating joke for what it was. Jack smiled, though it wasn’t a pleasant smile, as he remembered.

Pitch looked at Jack, but Jack refused to look at him. He could feel the gaze on the side of his face like a prickling pressure. But if Pitch wanted to hear this story, he was going to hear it on Jack’s terms. His body was awash with that old humiliation that he’d felt. It tasted bitter in the back of his throat.

‘I visited him a few times, you know. I kept coming back. I tried to convince him that we could be a good thing, not because we could have been – that was never going to happen – but because the idea of going back to the way I’d been living? Ha. No. I didn’t know, you see, about spirits and wights and the Guardians, for the longest time. I don’t know why. The Moon never told me, and I ended up spending a lot of time in the sky, or in the treetops or in wintry places. But I just wasn’t ever in the right place at the right time to be seen. You’d think that just once, just once in the years that passed in the beginning, that *just once*, someone would have...’

Jack paused, he took a deep, slow breath. It wasn’t like that anymore. It hadn’t been like that for a long time. He cleared his throat, focused on the story he was trying to tell.

‘Going back to the satyr like that, over and over again, was so not a good idea. I was being super clingy. I mean I look back on that, and I know I was just...so annoying. And so that was when the satyr got really angry. Maybe on the fifth visit, I don’t know.’

‘And he hurt you,’ Pitch said, and Jack could hear the frown in his voice. Behind the frown, something angry and sinister lurked.

‘Uh, yeah. Again, not like you think. Just... it got physical. Maybe I was grabbing onto him to convince him not to, ha, whatever. But he just lost all patience. He said some things, he hit me a few times. So I left.’

‘How many years was it, Jack?’ Pitch said. ‘How many years passed between you awakening as Jack Frost, and meeting the satyr? Tell me about this time where no one saw you.’

‘No.’

Jack jerked hard out of Pitch’s grip and slid off the armrest, grabbing his staff as he went. Pitch leaned forward and put the book down on a coffee table, but then settled back into the chair, interlacing his fingers together and resting them on his lap. Jack recognised that Pitch was trying to be as non-confrontational as possible.

Jack paced, then stopped a few metres away, looking out of the window. It would be nice out there. Cold and refreshing.

He didn’t have anything else he wanted to say on the matter. Jack didn’t even *think* about that time, and he certainly wasn’t going to bring up all of those old feelings by talking about it. That was a long time ago, and he was done with that.

‘I recall how you told me,’ Pitch said, ‘not so long ago, that you sat in on a lecture about solitary confinement. What it did to someone. What were the words you used? Ah, I remember, ‘They say it kills people. That solitary confinement is like torture.’ Did you stay at that lecture yourself because it rang so true?’

Jack ground his teeth together. His knuckles hurt where they wrapped around the staff. He realised that he was pushing it hard into the ground. It scraped against the wood of the floor.

‘And yet you blame yourself for how you behaved around the satyr. It seems perfectly reasonable to me,’ Pitch said softly, ‘*perfectly* reasonable, that someone so isolated would behave the way you did. A shame then, that it was a satyr.’

Jack felt something jagged and painful somewhere in his gut and wished it would go away. These conversations with Pitch, they *hurt*. He could never tell with Pitch if they were going to have a normal conversation, or if Pitch was going to dig. Even now, the fear that Pitch was going to leave, didn’t exactly have many reasons to stay, whispered through him. He had never thought of his behaviour around the satyr as reasonable. He wanted to believe what Pitch was saying, but he couldn’t, he wouldn’t dare.

‘And I imagine,’ Pitch said, gentling his voice, ‘that you were so *desperate* to be seen again, that exchanging yourself as currency for the privilege seemed an afterthought.’

Jack stared at Pitch, outraged.

‘You make it sound like-’

‘I make it sound like how I see it,’ Pitch said, firmly. Pitch was watching him with something that looked like concern. His brow had knitted, his lips were tight.

‘I’m not like that anymore,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘I don’t do that anymore.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said, and Jack felt a cool wash of relief. If Pitch had thought that what they’d done was just...that it was just an exchange, he had another thing coming.

‘Why are you like this? Do you think it’s easy for me to talk about these things?’ Jack hated the plaintive tone of his voice.

‘No,’ Pitch said, ‘I know it’s not.’

Jack nodded, he needed to hear it. Because Pitch acknowledging that he knew Jack found it hard soothed something inside of him. Made him feel a bit more like himself.

‘As for why I’m like this, did you think I was the only warrior who could read the fears of others? For a long time, my closest companions were fellow soldiers. We could hide nothing from each other. I’ve picked up a few habits that don’t seem so compatible with how people communicate here.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, ‘that...makes sense, I suppose.’

Jack’s body temperature was slowly returning to normal. The heat was dissipating quickly. He found, unexpectedly, that he missed the sensation of constant warmth along his side, the way his temperature had changed. His forehead still tingled where Pitch had drawn his finger across it.

‘Hey,’ Jack said, wanting to change the subject, ‘how come you could resist the compulsion like that? I thought... when they confronted you underground and took the shadows. Weren’t you forced to stay down there? Because of a compulsion? So when August told you to go to him, why weren’t you affected?’

Pitch stood up too, clearly uncomfortable. He brushed off his robes even though they weren’t dirty. Jack watched his hands and thought, *I know what they feel like on my skin.*

‘I was very weak when they came for me, which is possibly what they were waiting for. The shadows had already started revolting, you see, before anyone came to take them from me. The shadows aren’t meant to spend their time in prisons or cages. The Nightmare Men, in particular, only have allegiance for as long as you can give them what they want. Planets, expansion, domination, etcetera. Underground they could not expand, they could not feed on anything other than my fear; of which there was not enough to go around. They rebelled against me for some time before they were taken. I was not well when the Unseelie Court came for me, and after the...experience of having them ripped from me by the Nain Rouge, I was extremely ill. Very vulnerable.’

Pitch had stopped looking at Jack as he started talking about the experience. He was staring off into the middle distance, remembering, a faint pain pressing itself into the corner of his eyes and the tightness of his mouth. Jack realised they’d never really talked about it, how Pitch had coped being locked down there in his underground lair for so long.

‘So August was able to compel you?’

‘Something he found very amusing at the time, I assure you.’

‘So why did you find so easy to brush it off before?’

‘It is never *easy*. And I always feel a refused compulsion for...a long time afterwards. But as for what I did; I used my ability to create fear. What I did to snap the compulsion in your mind is something I can also do for myself. As soon as I saw him at the door, I started making sure I was well-anchored in fear. That and I am a great deal stronger now.’

Pitch cleared his throat and walked over to where his sheathed sword was leaning against the wall. He picked up, shrugged on the body strap and adjusted it until the sword sat comfortably, the hilt peeking over his shoulder.

‘You, on the other hand, are *extraordinarily* vulnerable to August’s compulsion. Dismayingly so. The Nain Rouge might want you for your power, but August may want you for your connection to

me. When he said that I show my cards too plainly, he was referring to you, I believe. And that is not promising. August believes that the best way to exact revenge is to play the long game. Kill those close to the victim first, then focus on the victim.'

Jack remembered how calculated and hungry August had looked when he'd mentioned wanting to break him. Jack didn't want to imagine what the breaking would entail, but he could guess. It made him uncomfortably chill, a unique sensation given his regular body temperature. He remembered how self-satisfied August had looked, taunting him. How gleeful when he'd promised that he could make Jack like it. He shook his head at what his life had become.

'These are like the funnest people of all time,' Jack said, shaking his head.

'Mm. Which is why I'm going to train outdoors. I want to learn how to bring this light up without your help. The snow gets in my eyes.' The complaint sounded almost petulant, and Jack grinned, because if Pitch thought he was going to get out of some snowball treatment that easily, he was in for a disappointment.

'I might go find Mora,' Jack said.

They went their separate ways through the Workshop.

As Jack stepped outside he was struck with a sudden worry that everyone could see it on him. Could see that he'd been jacked off by the former Nightmare King, that they had exchanged mutual handjobs.

But no one treated him any differently. No one jumped out and told him that he was doing the wrong thing. After a while, he let himself settle into a place that was less swamped with guilt. That maybe – out of all of the seriously screwed up things in his life – that was one of the parts of it that was actually okay.

Though he doubted anyone else was going to see it that way once they found out.

*

When he saw Mora, his face fell.

'Oh no,' he said, running his hands over her flanks in the shadowy crevice where she'd been resting. He could feel how much weight she'd lost. He could see her ribs. Her bones were closer to the skin than normal. Even though she was made entirely of sand, she still showed her malnourishment through a skeletal structure, through taut skin stretched over her hips. As Jack ran his hands over her, feeling how thin she'd become, he felt nauseous.

The sun had just set, and the liminal twilight left them in a dim light. It was almost dark, tucked into the crevice in the cliff-face near the Workshop. But Jack was learning all he needed to through touch.

He realised that his fear alone wasn't enough. He wasn't giving her enough of it. He draped his arms over her, feeling her chest expand and contract with her breathing. He spread his skin over her skin, trying to maximise the contact, wondering if that meant she could absorb more of his fear. And she nuzzled his side gently, unperturbed, simply content now that he was so close to her.

'You have to feed off other people,' he said, wincing as he said it. Because didn't that mean that she'd have to cause nightmares?

Mora pawed the ground once, stubbornly. A 'no' if ever he had heard one. But seeing her like this

was horrible. It made him feel like a terrible friend. The fear that she was wasting away was a fear that she could feed off, so he fed it back into her. After all, his fear was her food, and he had been neglecting her. Since the Nain Rouge had taken some of his power, he'd been moving from place to place, and spending far less time sleeping by Mora's side. And since Mora had caused that awful nightmare, the 'feeding frenzy' nightmare; he had not been around enough to offer her the more standard level nightmares that she required to stay hale and whole.

Jack realised he could not keep treating her like this. He could not keep spending so much time away from her side. He would have to tell North and Sandy at the very least. He would have to tell them tonight. What they thought of his strange friend didn't matter anymore.

'They're not going to like it, but I promise nothing is gonna happen to you,' Jack said, scratching a space behind her shoulder and watching as her eyes squeezed shut in enjoyment. 'You've been a far better friend to me than I've been to you. I'm going to make sure you can feed more often now. I'd never thought about what happened to a Nightmare if they didn't feed enough. So stupid. I'm sorry, Mora.'

Mora nibbled his sweatshirt, and he tugged it out of her sharp, black teeth, laughing.

'I wish you could talk,' he sighed, as he leaned his cheek against her shoulder. Fear pulsed through him in waves, but it was a small price to pay if it would keep her alive. 'I wish you could tell me why you came to me in the first place. Did we meet when I was fighting Pitch all that time ago? Or was it something else? Maybe that I'm scared all the time. I guess I am scared of kind of a lot, huh?'

Mora pressed her head against him, kept it close.

*

When dark crept over the land properly and revealed the stars, Jack snuck Mora out of her crevice. She followed him through the sky to his bedroom window. It was closed, and he couldn't open it from the outside. Frustrated, he shot a bolt of frost lightning at it, and the glass fractured in a frozen pattern before it shattered everywhere. It was loud, and he looked around cautiously. No one responded. No lights came on at the base of the Workshop beyond what was already lit.

He flew in through the window and then opened it properly to give Mora more space. Thankfully the windows were large, and Mora could clear it. Still, she followed him warily. She kept looking around, as though at any moment, one of the Guardians would come storming in. But no one came.

They were alone in his dark room. He could see was the glow of warm outdoor light under his bedroom door. The sounds of toy manufacture were muted, mostly gone. The yeti that weren't posted as sentries slept very well at night, and even the elves enjoyed their rest.

'You can stay here for tonight,' Jack whispered. 'If you keep it toned down, you can even make some nightmares. Okay? Just not like...not like that time. Not that bad. I've slept a bit lately, so, I don't mind if you make small ones. Okay? And then tomorrow morning I'll go and tell North and Sandy, and then bring them up here to introduce you.'

But he felt protective of her, bringing her into the Workshop like this. He walked over to her and wrapped his hands around her again. And then, when he figured that more skin to skin contact probably did help her absorb more of his fear, he pulled his sleeves up and rested his forearms against her, leaving his staff leaning against his torso. He splayed his hands, pressed his palms down, blew frost across the curve of her neck.

Time passed. Jack leaned hard against her and she accepted his body weight and his fear. It was a constant, low-grade pulse. Nothing like what Pitch could create with his eye-trick. Nothing like what he'd felt around August. He could close his eyes through it.

An hour later, he was thinking about nothing in particular, and Mora had her back leg cocked, deeply relaxed. He smiled as a sweet, golden light flared in front of his eyelids. For a moment, it was like he had entered into a dream.

Mora jolted out of his grip, and Jack stumbled, his eyes flew open.

A stream of thin, golden sand had made its way under the door. Sandy was seeking someone to give good dreams to. He was doing his job. The room glowed golden.

Mora shrieked when she saw it. She turned, and turned again, shuddering heavily, but there was nowhere for her to go. The thin stream of sand made a circle around them. It looked so benign, so lovely, so peaceful. It promised nothing but good dreams.

Jack felt nothing but terror ratchet through him.

It happened too fast to make any sense.

One moment he was spinning to find an exit, to see if they could jump the dreamsand, fly out of the window. The next moment his ears rung as Mora *screamed* in pain. He turned back, breath deserting him, a sound of fear pressing its way out of his throat and making it ache.

She was caught in the sand, turning golden, resisting. She kicked her legs towards him, the tendons in her neck rippled and stretched as she fought to get away from the yellowy light that was infecting her. She shrieked again, and then dissolved into a cascade of golden sand, just as Jack reached her to pull her from it.

The sand floated back into the stream, reabsorbed just as all the other Nightmares had been.

And then he was alone in the room with a spiralling circle of the dreamsand, turning everything honey gold.

'MORA!' Jack shouted, thrusting his hands into the dreamsand, determined to bring her back.

Instead of Mora; golden, mindless horses sprung up – attentive to what he wanted and providing a dream substitute – and began to trot around him. He stared at them, blinking through tears. They weren't even close. There was nothing of Mora in them at all. He knew she had to be in the sand somewhere. She just *had* to be.

'No,' Jack whispered, staring at the golden, prancing facsimiles that the dreamsand had brought up. Golden fragments clung to his fingers. They meant nothing.

Fear exploded through him like a thunderclap, it shook him down to his bones.

'No, no, no, no, no, no, NO!'

He grabbed at more of the sand, searching for her, but she wasn't there, she *wasn't there*.

He was saying things as he clutched at the stream of sand – saying her name, saying 'no,' alongside syllables of anguish that didn't make words, but were still terribly articulate.

He jumped when the door burst open with a bang. Light flooded in.

Pitch was standing in the doorway, wild-eyed and hair still sweaty from his sword drills. His face was pale. He took in the stream of dreamsand, the look on Jack's face, the way his fingers clutched at the sand. Jack saw the horror he felt in his gut reflected on Pitch's face and it made it all horribly real. Too real. *This is not happening. Oh god, this is not happening. This is a dream. It's a bad dream. It's one of Mora's nightmares. It has to be.*

'Jack-' Pitch gasped, stepping into the room, holding his hands out like Jack was a bomb about to go off.

On the heels of his terror, Jack felt a towering rage crest and peak inside of him. He stared at the dreamsand and then grabbed his staff and flew past Pitch. Something huge was growing inside of him. It was too big. It was too heavy. It was *too much*.

He raced down the spiralling Workshop, and almost bowled Sandy over in his hurry to find him. North and Sandy had been racing up the steps towards him. They looked panicked. Sandy's eyes were wide and concerned, North looked split between a determination to fight, and fear.

'Jack! You're okay! There was a Nightmare,' North said. 'Are there anymore? Is it the Each Uisge, is he here? Are you alright?'

The questions sounded caring enough, they sounded important, but they weren't important. Jack laughed in disbelief, a fractured, splitting sound that hurt his chest. Snow was appearing spontaneously in the Workshop, clouds were gathering outside.

He turned on Sandy, thrusting his staff out and holding himself back through sheer force of will. He was blind with outrage, he could hardly see who he was staring at. He only had enough vision left to make out Sandy's surprise, North's sabres in the corner of his vision.

'*Bring her back,*' he rasped. His voice was broken, and he didn't care. 'You bring her back. Or I swear I'll...I'll...'

'Jack, what are you talking about?' North said.

'It's *your* sand! You bring her back!' Frost lightning blasted from of his staff and Sandy raised his hands like a gun was pointing at him. Endless symbols flashed over his head. Jack couldn't understand and he didn't want to understand. There was no explanation that would make it okay. There was nothing that would help.

Jack could not remember a time he had felt so angry. He wanted to destroy everything. He wanted to lay waste to the Workshop. He wanted to go head to head with Sandy. He wanted to do whatever it took to get her back.

'She was my *friend!*' Jack cried. 'She wasn't just a Nightmare. She was-'

'What...are you talking about?' North said, slowly and with such confusion that Jack rounded on him next. North kept his sabres down, he looked stunned at the force of Jack's rage.

'Don't you even start,' Jack said, wiping away tears with his free hand. He turned back to Sandy. 'She's my friend. Bring her back! You don't know what it's been like for me! And you still don't know!'

His voice cracked on too many of the words. He knew, somewhere inside of himself, that this wasn't like him. He didn't show this part of himself to other people, damn it. The only person who had seen him this ruined was Pitch, and that was because of Mora. *Mora*.

His heart twisted hard, he bared his teeth at the both of them, daring them to tell him that she was 'just' a Nightmare.

Around them, huge flurries of snow fell fast and whirled on invisible winds. It was already gathering in piles on the wide staircase.

'Why aren't you bringing her back?' he demanded.

'Because he can't,' Pitch said, from behind him, joining him on the stairs. Jack squeezed his eyes shut. He felt Pitch stop by his side and face the two Guardians.

'Jack and Mora became friends months ago,' Pitch said, to a stunned North and a wide-eyed Sandy. 'The Nightmares aren't like the other shadows, they're not only spectres of malevolence. They originated in *your* dreamsand, they started as *good* dreams. Some of them are not pure evil. Do you really think we live in a world so black and white? Surely you, Sanderson, of all people, know that one person's nightmare can be another's good dream? Mora has been a most steadfast companion, more steadfast than *anyone* else has been. You have *no* idea what you've done, do you?'

'We thought he was in *terrible* danger,' North said, strained. 'A Nightmare in Jack's room. What were we supposed to think? As soon as Sandy felt it in his sand, we thought-'

'You can't bring her back?' Jack said, catching up with the conversation. He sounded pathetic. He sounded like a *child*. The hand holding his staff out was trembling. He thought he might shake into a thousand pieces.

Sandy shook his head slowly.

'Jack,' North said, pleading, 'why didn't you tell us sooner?'

This is my fault, Jack realised with a flood of self-recrimination, with the fear of a certain, unwanted knowledge. *How could I mess this up too? Why? Why do I always do this? If I had just told them, if I had just...*

'Jack, *wait*.' Pitch reached out to touch him on the shoulder and Jack swept backwards, out of the way and up into the air.

'Don't touch me,' he ground out. He didn't want *comfort*, he wanted *Mora*.

First Jamie, now Mora. A world without his favourite believer, a world without a steadfast Nightmare who raced the winds with him was not a world he could tolerate. It was a gaping wound inside of him. He couldn't keep doing this, he couldn't keep picking himself up the way everyone expected him to. Why did everyone think that fun automatically meant he would be happy all the time? And why, *why* hadn't he told them sooner? If he had just *told* them...

He was so done with it all. Done with the Guardians, with being a Guardian, with trying, with *himself*.

He shot upwards into the air. He fled. Pitch shouted his name and Jack ignored it. He didn't have to answer to anyone. He didn't have to *stay*.

Snow followed him as he flew through bedroom and bolted through his own broken, open window. He called the wind to him on a shattered voice. It whirled violently around him, and he let himself be swept so high into the sky and so far that he could no longer see the Workshop.

But there was no Mora by his side, and he was alone riding the winds once more. Once he'd

enjoyed it. Now it was just a reminder of her absence. He kept seeing her dissolve into the dreamsand. Kept seeing the strain in her neck as she'd reached towards him, eyes frantic, hooves flailing.

I did this. I didn't do it right, I didn't tell them. She didn't want to be in that Workshop. I wasn't even feeding her enough.

He went higher and higher into the atmosphere, where the air was thin and the temperature frigid; cold, even for him. He wanted to drive himself into oblivion, so that he didn't have to feel or think about anything anymore. He wanted to make the world stop.

He stared down at the earth, hovering on the winds, ignoring the huge snow clouds that towered behind him. From where he floated in the sky, the world looked tiny, insignificant. It looked far too small to house the people who had so much power to hurt him. It looked far too small to be a place of life and love and dying. Of loneliness and wandering the world looking for answers.

He was drained. He was tired. Just the act of leaving, of unconsciously making the snow in his distress, had worn at him. It rubbed his reserves of energy to nothing. It left him with no boundaries, no walls, no lines between himself and the heavy weights inside of him, the guilt, the loss.

He exhaled on a sob, and abandoned the wind. He plummeted down, sucked towards the land by gravity. He knew it wouldn't kill him, that it couldn't, but that didn't stop him from wishing there was some way to just make it all stop.

He stared at his staff with wide, wet eyes, and then watched as he unhooked his fingers from it. It spiralled away from him and his hand felt naked without it.

He closed his eyes in resignation. He let himself fall.

You Would Do That For Me?

Chapter Notes

There is like, so much in this chapter. It's the longest so far. Over 10,000 words!

I cannot believe how many kudos and comments this has. Like... wow. I mean. Oh my god. We even have fanart of the last chapter. [AND IT LOOKS AWESOME. Go check it out. Symphonic Pyro is the best.](#)

In the meantime, always, thank you so much for your kudos and bookmarks and subscriptions and endlessly for the comments. Your comments make me a better writer, so thank you. :)

Jack decided the definition of anticlimactic was falling with a soft thud into a cloud that cushioned, then held him. He'd moved through actual clouds before, he knew how wet and cold they could be, how hail swirled in their clutches, how water droplets hung waiting with promise. But this was different. He opened his eyes cautiously, only to see a golden, swirling platform of sand all around him.

Sandy.

He groaned, sitting up, feeling as shaky as if he had hit the ground. His mind was jumbled. He kept seeing Mora straining towards him. *Mora*. He shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself. In the distance, Sandy was flying towards him at speed, riding a glowing, dreamsand pterosaur.

But he didn't want the dreamsand for once. He didn't want the good dreams.

He would have done anything to make sure Mora was okay. He was going to tell everyone, he was ready to have nightmares every night, if necessary. He would have gotten Pitch to help him talk her into feeding off others. Maybe she could have even fed off Pitch. He would have done *anything*.

He couldn't face Sandy. His fingers dug hard into his ribs, pressing into bone and flesh. He had *neglected* her. He had neglected her the way he'd been neglected. He hadn't deserved her, and now she was gone.

I didn't visit Jamie enough, and now he's gone.

Jack gasped around the hard weight lodged in his body.

Sandy landed on the cloud, the pterosaur transforming and extending the floating platform on which they drifted. An eloquent worry marred his face, he wrung his hands.

Jack was too angry to deal with him, too angry to deal with himself, to be rational, to care. He hadn't felt like this in such a long time. The weight that had been pressing him had split open and he was drowning in it. It was like the old days, when no one could see him, when he had been driven mad by it. It pressed on his lungs and bowed his head under its pressure.

Jack felt a tiny hand on his shoulder and he looked up, weary.

Sandy offered a tentative smile, and spread his hands, creating a golden horse that looked very like Mora. But it wasn't Mora. He could tell. It had none of her feistiness; it was placid and good-natured and not sentient.

'I don't want a golden horse,' Jack said angrily. Pain twisted in him at the sight of the lustrous, healthy creature. 'I want Mora. Fear-causing, impatient, wind-riding *Mora*. You know, she *liked* having a personality. She liked being herself.'

Sandy let the golden horse dissolve back into the cloud. He sat down on the cloud and let his chin fall mournfully into his hands.

Jack figured that trying to escape by just walking off the edge of the sand cloud was out of the question. He hadn't expected anyone to follow him. And that it was Sandy? His last clear image of Sandy was of him raising his hands, eyes wide and frightened, as Jack threatened him with his staff.

Sandy flashed a question mark over his head several times. It flashed and dissolved. Flashed and dissolved. Jack had no idea what, exactly, he was asking. North had mastered the ability of reading Sandy, and Pitch seemed to be able to do it as well. But it was a fine art, and one that Jack struggled with. Nuanced conversation with Sandy was lost on him.

'I don't know what you're saying,' Jack said.

He realised his voice hadn't sounded so hoarse since the Nain Rouge had removed some of his life-force through his throat.

Sandy looked down at his hands, forehead wrinkling in thought. Then he looked up and flashed a picture of a horse, and then a question mark. He alternated the two symbols, and Jack thought he understood.

'Are you asking about Mora?' Jack said, wrapping his hands around the hollow inside of him.

Sandy nodded.

'I wasn't feeding her enough. I didn't know they needed to be *fed*. I mean, I knew she fed off my fear, but I didn't know they...I didn't know they could get... I didn't know that dreams and nightmares could starve and die. The *only* reason she came to North's Workshop in the first place was that she was hungry, she was so thin, oh, god.' Jack dug his fingernails harder into himself, hard enough that it started to hurt.

'I was going to tell you all. I was going to explain that she wasn't evil, or bad, or any of that. She was just...she just fed off fear. But she wouldn't take anyone else's. Only mine. I should have been with her more. She wasn't even feeding on kids anymore when she came to me. She...we...we started hanging out. I guess. She lived with me. I've always had a lot of nightmares, so it didn't seem like such a bad thing that she'd feed off them when I had them.'

Sandy sat up straighter when Jack mentioned his own nightmares and pursed his mouth in a frown.

He pointed at Jack and made the image of a person tossing and turning in a bed.

'I don't really want to talk about it with you,' Jack said, swallowing. 'I'm kind of angry at you right now. I don't want to have some big deep and meaningful about this. I want Mora back.'

Sandy nodded like he understood. But all the same, he pointed at Jack and repeated the image above his head. The figure tossed and turned repeatedly. Jack thought Sandy was being a bit like

Pitch, in this. Persistent *and* annoying.

Probably everyone from space is a total shit.

'I've always had nightmares,' Jack bit out, staring down at the swirling mass of sand beneath him. 'They come and go. They're not a problem. Everyone has bad dreams. At least with Mora, they could feed her. She didn't have to hurt anyone else, and she wasn't hurting me. It seemed like a fair exchange. It was nice...to have someone to wake up to. She watched over me while I slept. For months.'

I'd never had that before. He winced. He didn't know if he'd ever have it again. He didn't know if he even deserved it. People needed care, consistent care, not his capricious, fickle attention. But he would have fed her if he'd known, wouldn't he? Why didn't he know? He pushed his face into his hands and tried to block the world out.

He felt dangerously close to tears. He managed to hold them back, breathing deep, forcing control into the minute shudders ripping through his body. He felt naked without his staff. He wondered if it had hit the ground already. If it had splintered into a thousand pieces.

He looked up when Sandy waved his arms to get his attention.

Sandy made the picture of a sad face, and then above it, a mask showing a happy face. He lowered the happy mask over the sad face, and then the sad face disappeared. Jack thought he understood that one well enough.

'The fun I have is real, Sandy,' Jack said, heavily. 'It's real, and it's there. And I don't think I'd be...I don't think I would have made it through some of the things I've made it through without it. But, you know, the people who create the most fun aren't usually the happiest. That's just the way it is. My centre isn't *happiness*.'

Boy howdy, is it not happiness.

They floated through falling snow, and Jack realised Sandy was heading back to North's Workshop. He didn't think he was ready for that. He didn't want to have another one of those painful conversations with Pitch. He didn't want to see that bewildered expression on North's face, how confused he'd looked he realised that Mora was a friend and not a foe. He didn't want bright, gaudy colour and loud, flashing lights. He didn't want noise and walls and closed windows.

Sandy was considering Jack, head tilted, a small frown on his face.

Finally, he flashed a picture of Mora, and a picture of a snowflake, and a picture of the smiley face. That, Jack understood.

Did she make you happy?

'Yeah,' Jack said, rubbing a hand over his forehead. 'Yeah, she did. She didn't fix my problems or anything, but she was... Pitch was right. She was really loyal. She had a sense of humour. She liked snow days, didn't mind the frost. And the more time we spent together, the more she seemed to find things she liked for herself. Like, she started to love sleeping in trees. Like some kind of horse-vulture.' Jack laughed, remembering.

'And she avoided you guys like the plague. She didn't *want* to be absorbed back into the dreamsand. She didn't want to be with the other Nightmares even. I don't know why she became like that, but she did.'

The constellations revolved around them. In the distance, he could see the half moon up in the sky, watching them. He shifted so that his back was facing the Man in the Moon. Some things were meant to be private.

‘I didn’t *know* that she needed the food, I didn’t... I don’t need to eat. I thought that it was just the same for her too. You should have seen her. She wouldn’t even hate me for it. She was just *happy* to be there.’

Sandy suddenly jumped up. The cloud swirled with his excitement. A hundred symbols flashed up over his head. Jack didn’t even have the energy to indicate that he didn’t understand.

For the longest time, particularly in the first decades, he’d thought he was in some kind of purgatory. No one could see him. No one interacted with him. He’d thought there had been some sin, something he’d missed, and he was cast out into a world where only the moon offered him any succour; but a false succour that was never an explanation, a *reason*. The constant, haunting knowledge that there was something about him that deserved the loneliness had winnowed its way into his cells and stayed there, heavy and unrelenting.

He looked up when Sandy tugged on his sleeve.

Sandy sat down in front of him, so close that he could feel his presence; a shimmery warmth.

Sandy picked up a handful of his own dreamsand. With his other arm he reached forward and tugged one of Jack’s hands away from its clawed grip around his ribcage. His mouth pursed again when he realised how hard Jack had been holding onto himself. He drew forward Jack’s forearm and uncurled his fist, turning it palm upwards. And then he poured the sand into his palm.

Sandy stared at it intently. His little hands came up and moved through it, tickling Jack’s palm. They moved through it for another few minutes. And then he discarded the sand by brushing it off Jack’s skin, and picked up another handful and pouring that into Jack’s hand as well. He carefully moved through the grains with his small fingers, and then pinched up a single grain of sand.

It floated up into the space between them. Jack looked at it, confused.

Sandy pointed at the grain of sand, and then made an image of Mora. It was unmistakeably Mora – a thin, svelte creature, tossing her head, pawing at the ground. There was even a wild mane, an expressive tail.

Sandy kept pointing between the grain of sand and the image of Mora.

And then, once more, he picked up a handful of sand and this time mimed searching through it for other, single grains of sand amongst the millions.

Jack sat up straighter, staring hard at the single grain of sand that was floating in mid-air. It was tiny and easy to miss. He couldn’t look away.

‘Are you saying...’ Jack raised his hands and cupped the piece of sand between trembling fingers. ‘You’re saying that you can...find her? And make her again?’

Sandy nodded so much that his hair flopped back and forth.

‘This is her?’

Sandy nodded again, and Jack stared at the sand like he could see her inside of it.

‘Hey, girl,’ he said, without thinking.

There was a tiny flash of light, and the sand turned from pale gold to a familiar black. Jack stared at the piece of sand for so long that his eyes started to hurt. His hands wouldn't stop *shaking*. It didn't seem possible. She was *gone*. That couldn't be her. Could it? Pitch had said it wasn't possible. But there it was, a tiny black piece of sand. It had responded to his *voice*.

Sandy tugged on his sleeve again, and Jack looked down, eyes so wide that they were starting to hurt.

Sandy showed an hourglass above his head. But instead of falling at a regular pace, the sand was falling very slowly, and the top half never seemed to empty. Jack squinted at it, thinking of what it might mean, and then looked at all of the sand around them, all of the sand trailing away from them in the streams reaching out to thousands of children. He swallowed around a lump in his throat, staring at the tiny piece of Mora floating up and separate, one grain of sand amongst more than could be counted.

'It will take time?' Jack said, hesitantly.

Sandy nodded.

'A *long* time,' Jack added. 'But you can do it?'

Sandy nodded slowly, as though he was less sure of this. He looked down at all of the sand around him, and visibly swallowed. He blew air out of his mouth, eyebrows rising at the task he had set himself. No wonder no one knew that Sandy could do this. No wonder Sandy had never mentioned that he could do it.

In that, Jack realised with a shock what a big deal it was. That the Sandman, who was already overworked and sleep deprived, who was stretched the thinnest out of all of the Guardians, would sort through countless of grains of sand to find a Nightmare. To reassemble her. To bring her back to life.

It could take *years*.

Jack's mouth dropped open. He blinked rapidly, as his whole world tilted on its side and didn't make sense anymore.

'You would do that for *me*?'

Sandy looked up at Jack with horror, eyes going wide in dismay. Jack didn't know what he'd said wrong.

Jack's hand closed around the single grain of dark sand instinctively as Sandy leapt up from the sand cloud and hovered in front of Jack's face. Sandy took his face between both of his tender hands and pressed his warm forehead to Jack's, sighing a gentle warmth against his skin.

It was an unmistakeable gesture of love, of affection.

Jack blinked, shocked, and then gasped at the responding swell of emotion that moved through him. His hand clenched around the tiny piece of Mora that he held in his hand. His chest heaved with a sob that he managed to keep down. These things, they were supposed to feel good weren't they? He didn't understand why the pain just kept flaring inside of him, growing larger and faster with every passing second.

He wasn't going to be able to hold it in.

His whole body shuddered around the first sob that shook its way out of him. Sandy's hands tightened and then softened on his face, stroking his cheeks with tenderness. Jack shook his head. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't a reprieve he'd done anything to warrant. A world where Mora was gone made far more sense than one where a friend would offer such a huge amount of energy to help him, and he didn't know if he could stand it.

He jack-knifed into himself, and Sandy had to let go. Though he didn't let go for long. As Jack curled into the cloud, knees up by his chest, fist clenched around a tiny grain of sand, Sandy settled by his shoulders, resting his hands on them, patting him with a silent understanding.

It was coming too fast, he couldn't hold back.

The floodgates broke, and the dam of emotions that he had been shoving back came spilling forth in tears and horrible, grief-stricken noises that tore their way out of him. He pressed his hands to his face, one fisted and one flat, trying to hide himself from the world, embarrassed. But his body wouldn't stop shuddering with the force of his sobs, he couldn't make himself stop.

There had been too much, too fast. Jamie. Mora. His memories. His sister. The Nain Rouge. August, and the rest of the Unseelie Court.

He didn't know how much time passed. His tears seeped down and froze the sand beneath him. His hand ached where it was locked around the grain of sand that was the promise of Mora. And Sandy didn't tell him to stop, didn't try to interrupt him, wouldn't tell him to be quiet with symbols or actions, stayed as a silent witness.

Jack half-wished that Pitch was there, and was almost glad that he wasn't. He felt fragile at the seams, as though any well-placed sentence would break him apart and he'd never recover. Sandy's hands on his shoulders were steady and grounding, a reminder that even floating high up in the sky, the earth could find him and remind him there was stability, that it could be okay to break down.

When he was done, he felt numb and washed out. His body was still shaking, but in the hitched shivers of a child who had cried itself out. Sandy began to rub his back. It felt good, and Jack sighed. His unclenched hand wiped at his face, the back of his hand smeared wetness away.

He rolled onto his back and Sandy looked down at him, his face only a few inches away. It was easy to forget sometimes, how small Sandy was. His presence was so large.

'I miss her,' Jack said, weakly. He laughed at his own admission; if Sandy didn't know that by now, him saying it wasn't going to help. 'And Jamie. Did you know he has two daughters? And a husband? Wesley. I kept meaning to visit more often, but time passes so differently after a while and you get caught up in...it's no excuse.'

He rolled onto his side and then sat up, facing Sandy. The Sandman watched him quietly, without judgement, a look of acceptance and shared empathy on his face.

'You came after me,' Jack said, and Sandy nodded.

'And you're taking me back?' Jack asked, and Sandy showed a clock over his head. He let the hour hand move about four and a half hours, and Jack realised how far he'd fled and how quickly. But they weren't exactly rushing back, either.

'Why aren't we going faster?' Jack asked.

Sandy showed a lightbulb over his head. And then he pointed to Jack, and showed a person sleeping in a bed, a smiley face, a good dream circling above a sleeping face.

‘You...wanted me to sleep?’

And have good dreams?

Jack laughed under his breath. Passed a hand over his face.

‘I can’t remember the last time I had a good dream, Sandy.’

A moment later, Sandy was standing with hands on his hips and a furious look on his face. He pointed hard at Jack and then pointed at himself, and then threw his hands up in the air exasperated.

‘You’re busy enough,’ Jack said to Sandy’s stubborn, reproving face. ‘You are already so busy, don’t tell me you’re not. I wasn’t going to *ask*.’

Sandy raised a pointed finger and looked like he was going to launch into a lecture, and then he deflated, his shoulders slumping. He sat down and faced Jack, looked apologetic and tired.

Jack scooted over to him and grunted as he unlocked the fingers of his clenched fist. His knuckles hurt. He hadn’t realised he’d been making a fist that tight for so long. He offered Sandy the grain that was Mora, and Sandy took it with a speculative expression.

‘Is there anything I can do to help?’

Sandy shook his head, and then offered a small, weak smile.

A tendril of dreamsand stretched over the cloud and dropped Jack’s staff right into his lap. He laughed in shock.

‘You had it the whole time?’

Sandy nodded.

‘I didn’t even notice,’ Jack murmured.

Sandy closed his eyes and then showed a person falling, face down, above his head.

‘Yeah, I guess my eyes were closed,’ Jack acknowledged, painfully. He still didn’t feel entirely himself. He felt bruised and banged up, even though he’d never made impact. And his hands weren’t ready to settle on the staff yet. He looked at it on his lap and didn’t like what it represented.

When he looked up, he was startled to see a picture of Pitch above Sandy’s head. Sandy pointed between Pitch and Jack, head tilted.

‘Well, yeah. I guess. We’ve been...we get along? It’s weird, right?’

Sandy shook his head, as though it didn’t surprise him. The Pitch above his head transformed into a man wearing a combination of robes and armour, a huge feathered collar flaring out from the back of his neck, a two-handed sword at his side. Jack realised he was seeing Kozmotis as he would have appeared, all that time ago.

Sandy pointed at Jack and then pointed at Kozmotis and shrugged. It was almost as if he was saying, *I think you would have gotten along*.

‘He’s really wounded,’ Jack said, looking down at his hands. ‘We don’t talk about it much. He

doesn't bring it up and I...forget to bring it up. But it's there. At first I thought I was just sticking around because I was curious and because it seemed like he needed someone. But lately...'

Jack wiped at his eyes. They were still wet. His eyes were slowly leaking tears even though he no longer felt like crying. It was as though his body still had a great deal to say, even though his mind had moved on.

Sandy poked his knee.

Lately? He seemed to ask.

Jack looked around them to gather his thoughts and found himself smiling in shock. At some point, perhaps while he had been curled on his side, Sandy had made a menagerie of creatures around them. Pterosaurs and pterodactyls, brontosaurus who walked on air, huge cuttlefish and giant squid chasing each other around the sky. Jack saw opabinia and nautilus, even an immense horseshoe crab, sailing happily on the winds.

He became more relaxed, watching all the animals move around, coasting or flying with purpose, circling the cloud or following each other. When two squid entangled tentacles, they merged into a whale the size of a cumulus cloud, and breached in the sky.

'Lately,' Jack said, resting his fingers cautiously on his staff, 'I've been thinking maybe it's more than curiosity and...whatever.'

It was as close as Jack was willing to get to admitting that he liked Pitch, that he wanted to spend time with him. When he turned back to Sandy, he was surprised to see Sandy smiling at him like he was happy to hear it. That was unexpected. Jack decided to change the subject.

'Pitch said you were from the sky.'

Sandy's smile broadened and he pointed upwards, where the stars hung.

'You know, Pitch's light that he makes? It kind of reminds me of the way your sand glows.'

Sandy nodded so vigorously that his hair flopped again. Jack looked down at the golden sand and ran his hand through it. It moved around his fingers, glittering as it caught the light.

'They're the same thing?'

Sandy smiled in what looked like approval. He ran his own hands through the golden sand.

'Does that mean your sand can defeat the shadows too?'

Sandy's lips thinned and he shook his head. Then he held up his thumb and index finger and brought them closer and closer together, until only a tiny gap was between them.

'Oh, okay. Only a really small amount then?'

Sandy nodded.

And then he put both of his hands together and raised them to his cheek, closing his eyes and feigning a yawn. Jack yawned instinctively, without even thinking about it. It didn't seem to matter how much he slept these days, he could always sleep again. And besides, the past few hours had been *rough*.

'I am tired,' Jack said, weakly. 'I need to rest so much now, since the Nain Rouge. It's weird, I

just-'

Sandy interrupted him by pointing forcefully at the cloud. Then he actually came over and pulled Jack down until he was lying down.

'You are deceptively strong,' Jack said, giggling when small fingers poked mischievously into his ribs. 'Okay! Okay, I get it. I'm down aren't I? I'm sleeping.'

Sandy wasn't finished though. He marched around the cloud, creating sand pillows, fluffing them enthusiastically and piling them around Jack until he was in a huge, floating sand nest. The pillows were soft, as though air had gotten trapped between the sand and made them fluffy.

When Sandy was done, he came and lay alongside Jack, facing him with a content expression on his face.

'We should hang out more,' Jack yawned, and Sandy beamed at him.

The next thing he knew, a swirl of golden dust had wrapped around him. He drifted into a hazy, happy dream; where a solitary, wild Nightmare came and danced around him, healthy and in high spirits. She drew him up into the sky where the snow and wind were looking forward to his presence, and his powers had been restored.

*

He awoke, later, into the strangest dream. In it, he was floating on a cloud of sand back in North's Workshop. He felt rested, even though he'd slept for hardly any time at all. His limbs were lax and sprawled, and he didn't ever want to move.

In the dream, Pitch and North were talking amongst each other like they'd always been friends. At one point, they even started talking about their favourite Russian composers, and Pitch firmly maintained that even though Rachmaninov could be a little melodramatic, he was certainly superior to Shostakovich. Instead of arguing, North simply laughed and a moment later, Pitch joined him with his repressed, closed-mouth chuckle.

He could tell they were close by. He could feel them both as satellites of warmth. They weren't so close as to be on his cloud, but they were close. One was casting a shadow over him.

'You can still read the fears of others, yes?' North said.

'You know that I can,' Pitch replied. Jack thought that was a little presumptuous, but maybe Pitch was just like that in his dreams as well.

'And what of Jack's fears? How much more is there than is meeting the eye?'

'That...' The silence stretched for so long that Jack thought maybe he was slipping back into a deeper sleep. 'That is not for me to share.'

'He doesn't talk with us,' North said, sadly. Jack's heart thrummed. *No, you don't understand. I can't talk with you. You'd change your mind about me. It's for the best.* 'I worry. A great deal.'

'Yes, well, if what Sandy said was correct, the way he found Jack is probably a cause for worry,' Pitch said. And then: 'Did you know that he was entirely alone, for...at *least* a decade, before another spirit saw him?'

Silence. Jack had thought he was having a good dream, but he was starting to feel uncomfortable

now. Maybe it wasn't a good dream. Unconsciously, he snuggled deeper into the cloud, and buried his hands into the sand.

'North?' Pitch again. 'Are you alright?'

'Why wouldn't Man in Moon *tell us*?' North said.

'Have you ever asked him?'

'I cannot imagine an answer that Manny could give that would be good enough, so I have not,' North said, voice grim. And then, in a completely different tone of voice, one with his characteristic wonder: 'This world is amazing, that you can be standing here, asking me these questions, and I do not feel like I should be running you through with a sword.'

'I find that hard to believe, given your fears. I can tell, you know. I know, for example, that you suspect there is more going on between Jack and I than meets the eye.'

A long pause.

'That is not an answer,' North said.

'I didn't hear a question,' Pitch replied.

'Humour me, pretend it was a question,' North said. Jack could hear the stubbornness in both their voices.

'Is there more between Jack and I than meets the eye? Is there any safe way of answering that? You were not born yesterday, North. What do you want me to say?' Pitch sounded exhausted.

'It is the strangest thing. He spends time with you. He appears to like it. So you read my fears too, yes? Maybe you can't help it. I want to *hate* you for everything you've done. I am all about children, I *know* how you've hurt them. I know it in a way that the others do not. And yet – there – I see it in your eyes, you know too, don't you? I do not need some supernatural ability to read fears. It *haunts* you.'

Jack started to realise that maybe he wasn't dreaming. He kept his eyes closed, which was easy to do. He was still under the sway of Sandy's dream dust. Still washed over with lassitude.

'But you saved my life. You saved Jack's. You-'

'I do not want to talk about this,' Pitch said. Jack's heart leapt. *Now you know how I feel all the time, you pushy, relentless bastard.*

'You protect each other,' North continued, changing tack. 'Through Jack, you have come to join us. Not officially. I know that. But Jack never officially joined us either. He said the words. He is Guardian. But you know as much as I do, how separate he is, how much he is holding himself back.'

'I think, given his history, it's understandable. Don't you?'

'You must think we're fools,' North's voice was heavy. It was sad.

'Yes,' Pitch said coldly. 'I do. That is one assessment that hasn't changed, whether I am the Nightmare King or not.'

North cleared his throat, there was the sound of shifting.

‘We didn’t know-’

‘Defending yourself? Really? Haven’t we been through this already? I don’t want to have this conversation with you again. You understood me perfectly earlier. Do you want some succour? I’m not here to provide it to *you*. I’m not even here to provide it to *him*. I’m tired of these shadows. My whole life has been about them, my *whole life*. You may think it’s tiresome to have to face them again, but I am facing them for the thousandth time. And that is not hyperbole.’

‘And if we defeat them? Once and for all?’

‘Once and for all? Do you think you live in a *fairytale*?’

‘Anything can be defeated,’ North maintained.

‘Anything?’ Pitch laughed, it was a sound that scourged. ‘No, North, they can only be controlled. They can be diminished. And then – if you’re lucky ten, maybe a hundred, maybe a thousand years will go by before they need to be confronted once more.’

A long silence again. Jack wanted to reach out, he wanted to take Pitch’s hand in his own. There was a terrible desolation in everything he was saying. He didn’t know if North could spot it, but he certainly could.

‘Kozmotis,’ North said, as though he was turning the word over in his mouth, tasting it, ‘is that what you want to be called? You are no longer Pitch Black.’

‘I’m no longer Kozmotis Pitchiner. Pitch will suffice.’

Another silence. It went on so long that Jack began to drift off back towards sleep. He wondered where Sandy was. He wondered how long it would take to make Mora. His hands ached to touch her and feel her warm and real under his skin.

‘That scar at his neck,’ North said suddenly. ‘Tell me how he has been, *really*. Not his fears, I know you can’t tell me those.’

‘How he has been *really*? I thought we covered that earlier also,’ Pitch said, sighing. ‘He’s not well. What the Nain Rouge took from him...And she *will* take the rest, given the opportunity. He needs to sleep a lot. More than he knows, I suspect. In point of fact, it has affected him in ways that I’m not sure you’ve noticed.’

Jack’s brows furrowed against a sand pillow as he listened.

‘What are you saying?’ North said.

‘She removed his frost, yes. Some of it. But she also took some of that...essence, that you and the other Guardians bang on about *all* the time. His sense of fun has been diminished. You haven’t seen it? Felt it? His resilience has been lessened. And you haven’t noticed the Nain Rouge? Laughing more? More *gleeful* in her approach to evil?’

Jack’s heart was thumping painfully in his chest. He hadn’t made any of those connections. How long had Pitch known *that*? Why hadn’t he told him? It explained so much. These days, it felt like he was just always so much further away from feeling anything good. He had to fight so hard to find a level of joie de vivre which had always been so present before. He knew some of that was down to the loss of Jamie, but not all of it.

‘The Nain Rouge doesn’t just skim supernatural powers from someone, she feeds off their *soul*.’

‘Then why are you still alive?’ North said.

‘Augus Each Uisge thought it would be amusing to leave me down there. I believe, in his ideal world, a few thousand years trapped because of a compulsion at the bottom of the earth, where he could visit as his leisure, probably seemed like an ideal form of torture. He only let the Nain Rouge take the living shadows. He made her leave the soul. What little of it is left.’

Jack wondered when Pitch became so comfortable being so open with North.

‘It wasn’t just the frost that was taken,’ Pitch continued. ‘And I am not sure what sort of long-term effects there will be for him. The Nain Rouge doesn’t exactly make it a habit to leave anyone she feeds off alive.’

‘So his reaction to...Mora? That was more extreme because-’

‘Oh no, I’m afraid you don’t get off that easy,’ Jack could hear the dark smile.

‘I am not trying to get off easy, I am trying to *understand*.’

‘If you want to understand him, then *talk to him*. Honestly, it’s not rocket science. That all of you could miss the signs and signals of a damaged spirit whose expressions pass across his face like-’

‘You forget yourself, Pitch. You have been very stern, tonight. Understandable, yes? And I admit, I have *missed* signs and signals. But I have not missed everything. My approach was may be wrong. And I have done Jack a wrong, and I will address that. But you are still guest in my house.’

Jack expected Pitch to retaliate for being taken to task like that. But, instead, there was more silence. The shadow over his body shifted, and he realised it was Pitch who was standing so close to him.

‘Pitch,’ North said, quietly, tone completely different. ‘You are worried about someone. This is *good* thing.’

More silence. Jack wanted to turn and crack his eyes open. He wanted to see Pitch’s expression. But he didn’t dare.

‘He is back, and safe,’ North continued, in that persuasive tone of voice that Jack had experienced himself. It was a voice which soothed. Which softened the edges of internal brittleness. ‘And he is *strong*.’

The urge to open his eyes and watch, to see what was happening in the silences, was becoming overwhelming.

‘And what are we going to do about these shadows, when they come?’ North said, suddenly.

‘Die horribly, I suppose?’

‘Pitch,’ North laughed, ‘*Pitch*, haven’t you realised? Everything works differently here, on Earth. How long did those shadows jump around, from planet to planet, conquering everything until you came here and realised that it all worked differently? Is the Earth conquered? No. Are people quaking in their boots? Not everyone! Not even me! Have a little faith, my friend.’

‘Friend?’ Pitch said, voice thin. ‘That is not a word you should bandy about like it is worth nothing.’

'I know what the word is worth. I say what I mean, Pitch. If you don't like it, you are welcome to leave Workshop, no?'

'I could have been under orders from August to infiltrate the Workshop. It could have been the only reason I saved your life,' Pitch said, and North laughed.

'Now who is being a fool? What do the tattoos say on my arms, Pitch? You see I *know*. I know if you've been naughty or nice. That is not just something I do for the children. I can't help it. I know.'

Silence again.

'Ah, now look who's uncomfortable? Turning about is fair play, yes?'

'I think he's waking up,' Pitch said, avoiding the subject.

'Then you should take him up to his room. It has been a long night. For all of us. I have much to think about. If you need me, I shall be with the reindeer.'

*

'How much of that did you hear?' Pitch said, lifting Jack from the sand cloud easily and placing him on his bed. Jack opened his eyes, glad that he didn't have to pretend anymore. Though it was strange to have Pitch be so familiar with the act of just lifting him up. He couldn't tell if he liked it or not. Was it weird to like being carried by someone? He looked up at Pitch, shrugging in answer.

'You couldn't tell when I woke up?'

'No,' Pitch said. 'I suspected, but I wasn't sure. A person's fear can rise and fall in the period before waking, so it's not a trustworthy measure.'

'I heard you say that the Nain Rouge took some of my sense of *fun*? Why the hell didn't you tell me that, Pitch?'

Pitch's mouth dropped open.

'Do you mean to tell me you didn't *know*?'

They stared at each other. Pitch seemed genuinely bewildered that Jack hadn't figured it out, and Jack's anger was diminishing quickly. Pitch hadn't been trying to hide it from him. He lay down abruptly, letting his head hit the pillows. It was no sand pillow, but it would do.

'You gave everyone quite the scare,' Pitch said, sitting on Jack's bed. He looked down at the floor. It was an odd, closed expression. Something that didn't quite invite Jack in, and yet expressed some inner tumult.

Jack remembered how Pitch had looked when he'd burst into the room. How wild. He'd looked just as panicked as Jack felt. He hadn't recalled ever seeing him like that before. He frowned, turning something over in his mind.

'You felt it, huh? When I lost Mora?'

Pitch shifted on the bed. He did not look away from Jack, and Jack found that he couldn't look away either. He wasn't even scared of Pitch doing the eye-trick anymore. At some point, Pitch had become far less scary.

'It's different to other qualities of fear,' Pitch said, finally. 'Losing someone.'

Losing someone.

Jack's eyes widened.

Oh no.

'Pitch,' Jack said, pushing himself upright.

'I assure you, I'm quite-'

'Don't *lie*,' Jack said, kneeling beside Pitch on the mattress. He reached out hesitantly with his hand, worried that Pitch would jerk away. But Pitch stayed still, reserved, wary. Jack rested his fingers against the side of his face. Pitch's skin was warm, it was warmer even than most people's.

'You have enough to worry about,' Pitch said. Jack tugged on Pitch's hair, reprovingly.

'You know, I might be damaged by what the Nain Rouge did. And...have issues. But I'm not weak. I'm not some, I'm not...you only get a really two-dimensional perspective, reading people's fears like that. So when you felt me lose Mora like that, you can tell me that it reminded you of...her. Of what you lost. You can say that you didn't like it.'

'I didn't like it,' Pitch whispered.

Jack breathed past the pain in his heart. Pitch would have been tired from training, from trying to make the golden light. He would probably have been reading again, researching, strategising, whatever he did. As far as Jack knew, Pitch could actually *feel* other people's fears. Pitch had been mildly panicked the night that Jack had panicked due to Mora's nightmare. He'd probably felt the terror of loss all over again. Because Jack knew it must have been like a death to have his personality possessed like by those shadows all that time ago, to know – in his final moments – it was the last time he was ever going to see Seraphina alive.

'Probably a good thing you weren't there when Jamie died,' Jack said, and Pitch turned into Jack's hand. He closed his eyes.

'Well, I didn't *like* you then, so I doubt it would have affected me as much.'

'What does like have to do with it?' Jack said, curling his fingers over Pitch's face. He wondered if it would be inappropriate to lean in and kiss him. He felt a tingle move through his torso.

'It makes me more sensitive. It combines my...dislike of you feeling fear like that, with my own dislike of feeling fear of that quality. It amplifies.'

'I thought you liked it when I felt fear,' Jack whispered, leaning forwards and daring to press his lips, closed-mouthed against the side of Pitch's face. Pitch took a quick, shallow breath, and Jack did it again, lingering.

'I don't like it when you feel fear *like that*.'

'This fear thing is complicated, isn't it? Just like you. You should be the King of Complicated, instead of the Nightmare King. Maybe that can be your new title. Knowing you, you'd probably *love* a new title.'

'If I'm the King of Complicated, what does that make you?'

Jack laughed softly against the side of Pitch's face, making sure that some of his cold breath gusted into Pitch's ear. Pitch squirmed, and Jack nosed his ear lobe.

'Didn't you know? I'm Jack Frost, the Guardian of Fun. Haven't we met? I thought we'd met.'

'Oh,' Pitch breathed, turning his face towards Jack's slowly, 'we've met.'

Jack hummed with want as their lips met. He brought his hands up and touched Pitch's jaw with his fingertips, licking into his mouth. And Pitch, surprisingly, seemed happy to let him. Jack groaned when Pitch's tongue curled around his, one of his hands braced himself on Pitch's shoulder and he withdrew, pressing closed lips into the corner of Pitch's mouth and leaving them there.

'Is this okay?' Jack asked, low. 'Do you want a distraction?'

He threw Pitch's words back at him, knowing that Pitch would know exactly what he meant.

'You have a surprisingly steep learning curve,' Pitch said, smiling against Jack's lips.

'That's not an answer.'

'Is this?' Pitch's hands came up and anchored Jack's face, his mouth opened and Jack threaded his hands through Pitch's hair, kissing back. It was warm and slower than before, made lazy from an exhausting night.

He pulled gently on Pitch's hair until Pitch seemed to realise what Jack wanted, and lay back down on the bed. Jack straddled him, feeling like that much warmth between his legs should not feel as good as it did. He braced his arms around the side of Pitch's head, he tasted cinnamon and that faint bitterness, and he wondered what he tasted like. Probably just *cold*.

'The door is unlocked,' Pitch said, looking over, and Jack followed his gaze.

'Ha, can you imagine the look on North's face if he caught us?' Jack said as he reluctantly rose up from his position and floated over to the door. He locked it and flew back quickly, accidentally hitting Pitch's torso with his knee as he straddled him again.

'Watch it. And yes, I can. I don't know why you look so happy about it. I'm almost certain I wouldn't survive the experience.'

'Shut up. I'm meant to be distracting you.'

'So distract me. Until I feel sufficiently distracted, maybe I'll just wax lyrical about the-'

Pitch gasped when Jack pressed a bold hand between his legs, over the fabric of the robe. Pitch was already half-hard, and Jack resisted the urge to moan, because this was heady and wonderful. Because he was supposed to be providing the distraction, not the one being distracted. He flexed his fingers, then shifted so that he had a better angle.

'Don't look so pleased with yourself,' Pitch muttered, voice already deeper. 'Maybe I'm only allowing this because you've had a bad night.'

'Ha, really? Maybe I'm only doing this because *you've* had a bad night.' Jack felt a flash of mirth. Fears of Pitch leaving, of the world doing terrible things to hurt him felt so far away that it was as though they had no hooks in him at all. He knew they were still there, somewhere, but there was something dizzying about being on top of Pitch, in having the weight of him in his hand, even if it was through fabric. He swallowed a mouthful of saliva, hungrily. He had an idea, but he was so out

of practice.

Jack shuffled down Pitch's body until he was kneeling between his legs. Pitch raised himself on both elbows to watch him, as Jack pushed his robe to the side.

Pitch was wearing another of his black undershirts made out of that thin, almost see-through material. The pants matched, drawn together by a single, simple drawstring. He supposed the loose, light material made it easier to step through all of those graceful sword drills.

He took a deep breath. He was nervous. It had been a *really* long time.

'Jack,' Pitch said, 'you don't have-'

'Will you shut up?' Jack said, shaking his head. 'Let me figure this out for myself.'

'*Fine*,' Pitch said, like Jack wasn't about to give him a blow job.

Jack would have thumped him, except that he really did want to offer something to Pitch. A distraction. A sign that he wasn't in this alone. He figured Pitch was the kind of person who fell into a protective role without really thinking about it, which was something he would *never* have considered several months ago. But now, he could see how easily it would happen. And sure, he didn't mind that. He liked it even. But he wasn't going about to let it spin out of control, either.

Jack undid the drawstring, disconcerted that Pitch was still raised up like that, still watching him. But he focused on what he was doing. Once he had the drawstring undone, he made no move to remove Pitch's pants, but instead splayed his fingers underneath Pitch's undershirt. The heat there was searing, and he inhaled through his nose, feeling his palms warm. When he trailed his hands down Pitch's torso and met the hem of his pants, Pitch finally dropped back onto the pillow, leaving his hands by his side.

Jack's spine bowed as he pressed the side of his face against Pitch's upper thigh. Everything was heat around him, even with the light material between them. He inhaled deeply, steadying himself, could smell something astringent, a scent of some woody spice, and a muskiness which was clearly just Pitch. Jack swallowed another mouthful of saliva and edged forwards. He opened his mouth and mouthed Pitch through the cotton. Licking up with his tongue, feeling like he was overheating already. He must have felt terribly cold.

Pitch shifted minutely underneath him. The sound of sheets being gripped in a fist made Jack smile as he continued, finding his way through what he was doing, scratching his nails lightly over Pitch's belly.

When Jack sucked him through the fabric, Pitch made a small, aborted sound. His legs spread slightly, his hips lifted.

There, he thought, liked that, didn't you?

He tongued the fabric into the sensitive skin. Stretched his mouth over the head and laved it, getting used to the taste. Jack was already hard, his arms were shaking where he braced himself.

Pitch lifted his hips helpfully when Jack pulled his pants down, and before he'd even had a chance to settle again, Jack's mouth was on him. Pitch groaned, one leg bending up and knocking gently against Jack's body, acknowledging him. Jack closed his eyes. There was warmth everywhere. His mouth was warming up already, his palms were heating, it made him feel dizzy.

There was no way that Jack could take Pitch all the way down, so he used his hand to help,

wrapping it around hot skin. He kept waiting for Pitch to protest, to say it was too cold, but he didn't.

His jaw was starting to ache already, he was definitely out of practice. But he didn't want to stop. He liked the taste, he even liked the bitterness; years spent outside around pine and fir trees had changed his tastebuds. He lowered his head further, lips meeting his fingers where they wrapped around Pitch. And then he began to move his head up and down, sucking on the upstroke, curling his tongue around the head.

Pitch groaned, and Jack made a responding sound in his throat, pleased that he was affecting him. It made him harder, and he pressed himself into the mattress, willing himself to stay focused.

Easy, Jack reminded himself, See? Doesn't matter how much time has passed.

But as time passed, Jack realised that he needed something more, some kind of *contact*. It was different, with Pitch. It was sometimes hard to know if he was doing the right thing, he worried that he wasn't doing a good job. And he wanted desperately to do a good job, he wanted to please. He didn't feel as anchored, like this. He realised he was spinning out of his depth, that without some kind of connection, it would remind him of other things, other times.

'Hair,' Jack said, rising up, swallowing hard.

'Pardon?' Pitch replied, hoarse.

'Put your hands in my hair.'

'I suspect I may pull.'

'Oh, for god's sake, will you just put your hands in my hair, please?' Jack said, and Pitch rose up again, staring at him.

'What?' Jack said, belligerent.

'Come up here,' Pitch said, pulling on his arm. 'Come here.'

Jack resisted for a moment, because he didn't want to stop either. But Pitch was already reaching for him, and Jack moved up his body.

The kiss was visceral. Jack braced himself against Pitch's chest, moaning brokenly when Pitch slowly fucked his tongue into Jack's mouth. There was a firm hand in his hair, and another scraping fingernails up his ribs. When the tip of Pitch's tongue touched the roof of his mouth, he gasped away, blinking to try and concentrate, to try and remind himself that he had something he wanted to do.

Pitch pulled him back, biting at the side of his neck, trailing his lips along Jack's jaw until he reached his chin, and then moving back up to claim his mouth again. He made a hungry sound as his lips sealed over Jack's, and Jack felt weak from it. He was definitely way out of his depth. What had started as a distraction for Pitch, had turned into something that was turning him boneless with want. He pulled his mouth away, dropped his forehead down to Pitch's chest as he gathered unnecessary air into his lungs, as he reminded himself what he was doing.

He started to slide down Pitch's body again, and Pitch let him, though he kept his hand in Jack's hair the entire time. Jack was absurdly grateful, even embarrassed, but it helped. He shivered when Pitch's other hand splayed around the side of his face and then also spread up through his hair.

He blew a cold breath around Pitch's cock, and Pitch's fingers twitched on his scalp.

'Tease,' Pitch said.

Jack's lips quirked in a smile, and then he began again. He licked his way down the shaft. When he finally took Pitch into his mouth properly, the hands in his hair tightened, and he felt minute shifts in Pitch's palms and fingers. They were repressed, but they were there nonetheless. They were – Jack realised – the instinctive movements of someone who wanted to dictate the pace, but was holding himself back.

I can work with that. He closed his eyes, concentrated on the heat and the warmth and the pressure. He let Pitch guide the rhythm, and focusing on that made him feel like he was where he was supposed to be, as though he was doing the right thing.

Pitch must have realised that Jack was responding to the pressure in his hands, and he began to guide Jack more obviously. His fingers dictated the speed. His palms pressed into Jack's head, almost holding him down when he wanted Jack to linger on a downstroke. Jack obliged. His mouth began to feel more warm than cold, his whole upper body was starting to overheat. He pressed himself harder into the mattress, his own hips responding. He liked it, being guided, being shown what Pitch liked. He even liked tilting into a world where it was almost too much, and he knew he was close. Closer than he thought he could get from this. Heat lanced from his head down his spine in a ripple, and he cried out as he continued moving. Damn it, he was *close*.

Pitch's thighs began to tremble, his hips were lifting, undulating in time with Jack's movements. When Jack sucked particularly hard on an upstroke, Pitch cried out, hoarse.

'Jack,' he gasped.

Jack hummed in acknowledgement.

Pitch's hands suddenly tugged on his hair, and Jack knew what was coming and was surprised. Surprised at how considerate Pitch was being in warning him, surprised at himself. He didn't need to pull off. He was doing just fine. He didn't want to be anywhere else.

He hummed again, cold flaring up from deep within his body and wrapping itself around Pitch's cock, freezing his own, warm mouth.

Pitch's hands flexed, and then suddenly pushed Jack down, holding him still as his hips thrust up. Jack held on, digging his fingers into Pitch's hips. He swallowed, over and over, as Pitch shuddered. His whole face felt like it was burning, and the warmth of Pitch slid down his throat, setting him on fire. His own hips were shaking. He was so hard. What a time to find out that he liked being directed like that, that he liked being held down. It made his head spin.

Pitch lifted one of his hands from Jack's head, and then the other. Jack looked up, Pitch slipping from his mouth.

'Good, huh?' Jack said, throat scratchy.

Pitch sat up, leaned forward and grabbed Jack by the sweatshirt.

'You,' Pitch said, his voice dark and intent.

'I'm fine,' Jack said, because it was true. He was fine. He could hold off. He didn't need to come right this second.

Pitch only laughed.

Jack found himself manhandled onto his back. A hand thrust into his pants and he was embarrassed, he didn't want Pitch to know how hard he was, how close. But as soon as Pitch wrapped a burning hand around him, Pitch groaned in approval.

'Yes,' he hissed, as though it was his victory, his triumph.

Jack's back arched, his mouth stretched open. Pitch was too hot, his grip was firmer than Jack normally used on himself, his pace was too fast, too exacting. There was nothing he could do except respond.

He came hard, hands fisting hard into the bed. He knew that his body temperature wasn't as hot as Pitch's, he knew that, because he could still feel the temperature difference between Pitch's hand and his skin, but he was burning. He was sure of it. Pitch's hand moved him through his orgasm, until he was too sensitive, until it was almost painful. His hips jerked, and he whined.

'Pitch,' he whimpered, 'I-'

'I am going to have so much fun with you,' Pitch said, letting go and biting Jack's collarbone hard. He licked at the tooth marks, and Jack sighed, blinking at the top of Pitch's head sleepily.

'Has anyone ever told you that you're really controlling?' Jack said, tugging Pitch up to his mouth, kissing him sleepily, slowly.

'Yes, actually. I'm quite good at being *controlling*,' Pitch said, and Jack could feel the smile, could hear it in his voice.

Pitch shifted so that he was lying alongside Jack, one long arm sprawled over his chest, and lips pressing insistently into his cheek and neck. It was sweet, Jack realised. He shifted until he was comfortable, it was taking a surprisingly long time for his body temperature to return to normal. Pitch really was warmer than average. Those he'd been with in the past tended to cool down, until they both ended up lukewarm. But Pitch produced a constant body heat no matter what the temperature was, no matter what he was exposed to.

'We're going to talk about it, tomorrow. About how Sandy found you.' Pitch said, and Jack refused to open his eyes. He ignored the twinge in his gut.

'I know,' Jack said.

'But not now,' Pitch promised.

'Not now,' Jack echoed, relieved.

Pitch pulled Jack closer unconsciously as he sighed into sleep. Jack wasn't as tired as he thought he'd be. He was comfortable though, and he didn't want to move. Pitch's face had taken on that simple, sleep-innocence. He didn't look like he'd just been reminded, unexpectedly, of the loss of Seraphina.

Jack lay, looking up at the ceiling, wondering what it meant that the Nain Rouge had taken some of his sense of fun and irreverence along with his frost. He wondered where his actual issues ended, and that lack began. How much of his current depression could be explained by that? He thought of her laughing in delight as she'd attacked the Workshop and it made him shiver with rage. That was *his*, all of it was *his*, and it was being twisted into something evil. It made him realise – more than ever – that he was going to get what she took from him back. The others could

find a way to defeat the Unseelie Court.

He was going to find a way to defeat the Nain Rouge.

The Heart Wants What It Wants

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, you guys. Nearly 300 kudos. What? I can't even.

Thank you as always for the kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and always a very special thanks for the comments.

He hadn't slept. After about an hour, he found himself grimacing at Pitch, envying his ability to sleep so soundly.

He kept looking for Mora, even though he knew that she wasn't there. His mind wouldn't stop working. Everywhere he turned in his thoughts, there was something to think about. There was the Nain Rouge and what she'd done to him, and how it had even more of an impact than he'd realised. And the fact that he liked Pitch's controlling side, which he probably shouldn't tell Pitch any time soon, in case it went to his head. How generous Sandy had been, and how maybe he needed to try harder, to offer more of himself to others. How to go about defeating the Unseelie fae. What they could possibly do about the shadows. Seraphina. Jamie. All the loss that chafed at him.

Jack frowned. There was no relaxing through it.

Pitch mumbled something in his sleep and his arm shifted on Jack's torso. Jack shivered when Pitch's fingers began to stroke his shoulder. It was a sensual but absent gesture. When Pitch whispered, 'shh,' Jack turned – startled – sure he was awake. Pitch's eyes were closed, he was breathing evenly, his face was lax.

Still asleep then, still responding to Jack's fears. Jack couldn't decide if that was comforting, or creepy. Eventually he settled on *crappy*. He didn't want to bother Pitch's rest.

Jack slipped out of bed shortly after dawn. The Workshop was already bustling when he crept out of his room. He closed the door behind him, hoping nobody would make a big deal out of the fact that Pitch was sleeping soundly in his bed, sprawled and taking up too much room. The Guardians were going to find out eventually, right? Though Jack was in no rush for them to find out. He didn't like to be confronted on subjects he had no answers for. Life was hard enough.

He floated up through the Workshop. He found a window near the top and opened it just enough that he could slide underneath it. The air was fresh, the wind plucked at him, and he smiled. He looked up at the winding staircase that continued along the tower walls and ignored it, shooting straight up on a gust of wind towards the edge of a golden cloud.

Sandy was asleep in the centre of a swirling mass of sand cumulus; head resting on one hand as he snored quietly. Jack settled down onto the surprisingly fluffy cloud and noticed that Sandy's other hand was open, palm up. He looked into it and saw five tiny, black grains of sand.

A really long time, huh, Jack told himself, wishing he could undo that whole, horrible evening. He had been so close, so ready to hurt them. He didn't want to ever see that side of himself again. He didn't know he could be pushed that far.

‘Sandy,’ Jack poked him gently in the knee. ‘Sandy, I have to talk to you.’

Sandy blinked awake and yawned hugely. A moment later he thrust his open hand up underneath Jack’s nose, beaming at the pieces of Mora he had managed to find.

‘Yeah, I know,’ Jack grinned. ‘Just, take it easy, okay? I want to see her again, so badly, but I wouldn’t forgive myself if you hurt yourself over this. And...I’m sorry. For yesterday. Can you believe it was only yesterday?’

Jack ran a hand through his hair and then pressed his fingers into the sand, watching as the frost spiralled outwards.

‘But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. You know the Nain Rouge, right? You knew about her before all of this?’

Sandy nodded, brows knitting together.

‘What are her weaknesses? Everyone has weaknesses, right?’

Sandy’s mouth stretched into a frown. Jack’s skin itched. He was tired of waiting for her to attack them, to finish what she’d started. He would find out what her weakness was, or – hopefully – weaknesses, and he would do something about it.

Sandy shook his head. No symbols appeared above his spiked hair. Jack had no idea if he was saying that he didn’t know, if he was refusing to tell Jack, or if there was some other meaning he was missing entirely.

‘Come on, Sandy, you must know something.’

Sandy shook his head more. Then he pointed at Jack and pointed to the door. When Jack started to ask why he wouldn’t say anything, why he had to leave, Sandy made a row of Zs above his head, yawned once more.

But this time Jack knew Sandy was saying more than, *I’m tired*. This time, Jack could tell that Sandy didn’t want to tell him. It wasn’t that he didn’t know, it was that he was refusing to say. Jack’s teeth clenched together. He’d felt so good about his decision to get his life-force back, it was the right thing to do, and Sandy wasn’t helping him. Maybe no one would help him.

‘I don’t need protecting, Sandy,’ Jack said, and Sandy raised his eyebrows.

That was something Jack read just fine. It was the universal sign for, *Could’ve fooled me*.

But Sandy was also genuinely tired. A few seconds later he had slumped in his cloud, snoring gently once more.

*

‘If I were to ask someone about the Nain Rouge,’ Jack said, bursting back into his room angrily and ignoring the way Pitch jerked awake with a start. ‘Who the hell would I ask? Who would actually *give* me the information I want? Would *you*?’

‘Good morning,’ Pitch said, sourly.

‘I’m going to destroy that stupid, soul-stealing kid, but I need to know *how*. And if anyone tries to get in my way, it’s not going to be pretty.’

‘Ah, I see we’ve hit anger,’ Pitch said quietly. Jack rounded on him.

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’

‘Anger? Like this is what, the five stages of grieving? Ol’ Jack Frost had a part of his soul ripped out of him and now he just needs to get over it? Are you talking down to me?’

Pitch’s eyes widened and he looked at Jack like he’d turned into a spider. Then his face smoothed, and he got out of bed in one fluid movement, smoothing down his robes.

‘If you had actually *stayed*, last night, instead of fleeing, perhaps you would know that the last thing I think you need to do is ‘get over it.’

Jack vaguely remembered Pitch’s conversation with North. Hadn’t North said that Pitch had yelled at them, earlier? What had he yelled about? He tried to imagine Pitch taking North and Sandy to task, and it wasn’t pretty.

The image of Pitch yelling at North and Sandy disappeared under the weight of what he was feeling. The walls were too close, there was something wrong inside of him. The Nain Rouge had done that. He didn’t understand why no one was helping him. The idea that he would just leave it, that he wouldn’t try to figure her out in order to ‘protect himself,’ was stupid.

‘So *help* me. She’s got weaknesses right? Your light would weaken and destroy the shadows. And we could-’

‘Let’s go for a walk. Outside.’

‘I want to talk about this,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

‘So do I. *Outside*. I’ll meet you out by the lookout shack.’

Pitch took two steps into the shadowy corner of the room and disappeared. Jack stared at space he’d left behind, and then flew out of the open window, still broken from the events of the previous evening.

As he raced through the winds, he realised he felt brittle. He was panicked. Something was building inside of him, left him shaking. He took a deep breath, then another, and then suddenly felt like there wasn’t enough air.

It was a strange panic, one he hadn’t felt before, and it wound its way through him, knotting into his spine and his hands. By the time he landed in the cast shadow of the lookout shack, he felt like he was choking on it. Jack could barely acknowledge Pitch, raising a hand to his throat and focusing on breathing. If he focused on the empty gap inside of him, he thought he’d throw up.

‘The flight didn’t take your mind off it at all, did it?’ Pitch said to himself.

‘Off what?’ Jack gasped. He realised that he was having a panic attack. He bowed over, listening to himself wheeze for air. He was reminded of how he’d hyperventilated all that time ago, when Pitch had needed to teleport him home and he was too weak to do it for himself. That had been just after the Nain Rouge’s attack.

‘I’ve seen warriors go through this,’ Pitch replied.

‘Go through *what?*’ Jack sank down to his knees, compacted snow greeting him. He didn’t even need to breathe. Why did he feel so bad? ‘What’s happening to me?’

He felt Pitch close by, kneeling by his side.

‘I’ve never seen it this delayed though.’

‘Oh. My god. If you don’t just *tell* me what the hell you’re talking about, I’m going to lose my mind.’

‘Of course, the warriors I’ve seen go through this were a great deal more stoic about it.’

‘Awesome,’ Jack gasped, ‘make fun of me for not being *stoic*. That’s really helpful. You’re the best.’

A hand pressed between his shoulders, and Jack bit down a whimper, because he was not that needy, he was *not*. He could be stoic, couldn’t he? He could do that. Was that what he was supposed to do?

‘Easy,’ Pitch said.

‘Nope,’ Jack responded, hunching in on himself. He couldn’t even tell what he was feeling. A whirlpool of sensation had opened up inside of him. If he focused on it, it felt like his mind was going to be sucked into a vacuum. He could hardly concentrate. ‘Nope. What’s happening?’

‘The Nain Rouge is happening.’

Jack started to laugh, because if Pitch thought he was being helpful, if he thought he was even *close*, he had another thing coming. But the laughing turned to strangled, choked up gasps and it didn’t matter how much he told himself that he didn’t need to breathe, his body wouldn’t stop screaming for air. He made a sound like a sob, and then clawed at his own chest, as though he could make his lungs listen, make them get the air they needed.

When Pitch’s hand smoothed awkwardly down his spine, Jack pushed himself away out of reach. He ended up on all fours, staring down at the snow, trying to find a locus of control, some focus, *anything*. His mind was splintering.

It was just like that stupid nightmare he’d had, that feeding frenzy nightmare that Mora had caused. Everyone had forgotten him, and the Nain Rouge... Jack made a sound. Suddenly the Nain Rouge’s hand was in his chest again, fingers around his *heart*, and he couldn’t make it stop, and he couldn’t, he couldn’t-

Pitch swore roughly and Jack gave an inarticulate cry when he found himself bundled up into Pitch’s arms. He wanted to say that it was too much, that the sensation of being close to someone was just too much, but no words would come.

Pitch’s arms squeezed vicelike against him, and the pressure snapped something inside of his brain. He stopped clawing at his sweatshirt and sagged against Pitch. Adrenaline galloped through him, he was shaking.

‘It’s better if I tell this as a story,’ Pitch said, shifting Jack in his grip until Jack was facing North’s Workshop, his spine against Pitch’s torso. Pitch’s head rested above his, chin pressing into his hair, and his arms wrapped tightly around Jack’s arms. His arms were long and crossed over his torso, anchoring him. Jack felt small. He was surprised at how much the pressure was helping. The gentle touches had felt like fire across his skin, but this was...better.

‘We were trained across a variety of disciplines. The physical, the mental, the metaphysical. It is nothing like what humans experience here in their own militaries. And so, part of the training was learning to invite an element of darkness into our bodies.’

‘To conquer darkness you must become darkness,’ Jack said.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, a warmth in his voice, ‘you remembered. It was an initiation of sorts, and not everyone passed. To make room in oneself for the shadows, and for the golden light, a space needs to be created. Something must be sacrificed. And while we had no Nain Rouge crudely sucking out whatever she wanted, we still found ourselves surrendering a part of our soul, our life-force, when the time came.’

Jack blinked, listening.

‘In the long-term, it affected each of us differently. The golden light went some way to appeasing the wound inside of us. But before the light came, and after the loss of that part of ourselves, the soul enters into a protest. There is a period where the soul cries out. At first, quietly; but then, with time, the panic comes.’

‘What...do you do?’ Jack said. His case was different, wasn’t it? He could find a way to get back whatever the Nain Rouge had taken.

‘Ride it out. Share the burden amongst colleagues who also shoulder it.’

‘And apparently be really stoic about it,’ Jack murmured and Pitch sighed.

‘I spoke out of turn.’

‘Yeah? Well?’ Jack pulled Pitch’s arms off him and stood up, shakily, picking up his staff where it had fallen against the snow. ‘I didn’t choose to sacrifice some part of myself to join in some noble fight against those stupid shadows. She took something from me. And she still has it. I want it back. And if you’re not going to help me get it back, I will find someone who will. Everyone has a weakness. *Everyone*.’

‘But not everyone can *exploit* that weakness.’ Pitch stood up too, shaking his head, tamping down frustration. ‘You sound like a *child*.’

‘Jamie Bennett helped beat you, and he was a *child*,’ Jack said, teeth clenching.

Pitch ran both of his hands through his hair.

‘I need a minute,’ he said, plainly.

‘Are you serious?’

‘Please, give me a minute. I do not want to hurt you with what I have to say.’

Jack turned away abruptly and walked over to the empty lookout shack. He placed his fingertips to the window and sent frost spiralling out onto it. A minute ticked by, then another. When Pitch cleared his throat, Jack felt too resentful to turn around and face him.

‘There is no easy way to tell you that you *can’t* take on the Nain Rouge. It has nothing to do with your lack of ability, or that I don’t think you’re capable of inflicting great damage on the Unseelie Court,’ Pitch said, and Jack spun around. Pitch wasn’t even looking at him. ‘She will *kill* you. And your need to square off with her, and her in particular, is not rational. It is the hollow bell of your

soul seeking its other part. And it will drive you to your death, if you do not learn how to master that lack.

‘Do you feel like a hero, Jack? Do you know how many warriors felt like heroes after they sacrificed a part of their soul, soldiered out *alone*, and got themselves slaughtered, or worse – turned into Nightmare Men? Not because they were heroes, not because they were noble, or doing the right thing, but because they could not bear what was missing?’

Pitch turned to him finally, vertical lines creasing his forehead, shaking his head with agitation.

‘I knew there would be long-term consequences as a result of what the Nain Rouge did to you, but I hoped that this would pass you by. You likely think – even now – that the right thing to do is to find some miraculous weakness and strike at her centre. You don’t even know if she can give back what she took. Even if you could take her apart, piece by piece, you don’t *know* how that part of you will have changed, or altered, living in her like that, interacting with whatever soul she has, whatever souls she possesses. You would not be yourself, if it came back to you. Things will never, *ever*, be the way they were again.’

Jack’s eyes stung.

‘I *know* you don’t want to hear that,’ Pitch said, and in that moment, he looked like he would rather be saying anything else. ‘And I’m not advocating that you get over it, or even that you abandon your hope that something might be done. Something may yet be done. But the answer isn’t for you to find her weaknesses and then assume that you – of all the people on the planet – are the one who will destroy her.’

‘You don’t think I can do it,’ Jack said, hesitant. He didn’t want any of it to be true. Even now, some wounded, hurt voice inside of him screamed that Pitch couldn’t possibly be right, that he didn’t know what he was talking about. He wanted to fly away and find someone to ask, people to talk to, knowledge to mine for information on the Nain Rouge. And in that, he knew that Pitch was right. He was looking for some miracle weakness, some Achilles Heel. And how would it work? He would destroy her. And then what? He closed his eyes, something like a cramp twisted through him.

‘I think you are a bloody-minded, stubborn *fool*. And I think that means you can do a great deal that you set your mind to. I also believe your bloody-mindedness is facing the wrong way at this time. I promise you, I have seen this too many times to be counted: you will get yourself killed.’

‘But-’

‘If, on the other hand, you were willing to work *with* us, instead of on your own...I promise you that I will take you on any offensive action we take against her. And we will see what happens. As dangerous and as risky as I think that is.’

Jack opened his eyes and looked at him again. Pitch had spread his hands as if to say; *It’s not like I can stop you.*

‘The soul can be eloquent,’ Pitch added, ‘but the soul can also be crass. It is never more crass than when it is missing a piece of itself, and it wants that piece back.’

Jack had felt so on track, when he had decided that he –and he alone – was going to take out the Nain Rouge. Could it really have been the clamouring of his broken soul? He didn’t want Pitch to be right, and yet...

‘I didn’t realise,’ Jack said, ‘until last night, listening to you talk to North. I didn’t know she took more than just the frost.’

‘Then that’s probably what triggered this off,’ Pitch said, frowning. ‘I truly thought you knew. Do you have so little sense of yourself, that you couldn’t tell?’

‘Sense of myself? Are you serious? I don’t even know what that means. My whole life has been an exercise in trying to figure out who I am and why I’m here and never coming up with any reason that *worked*. And, yeah, I discovered my memories, and that helped some, but then Jamie died and...’

‘It was all up in the air again?’

‘Something like that.’

Pitch nodded and then dug his feet into the snow. Jack realised with a shock that Pitch wasn’t wearing his boots, and he was pressing his toes –his bare toes – directly into the freezing cold of it.

‘How come, if your body temperature is so warm, you can do that and it doesn’t hurt you?’

Pitch shrugged. He looked strangely vulnerable. The usual, even stillness that he projected was gone. Jack wondered how much of Pitch was some kind of persona, some kind of General or warrior facade. He wondered how many other people had seen him like this – pensive, burrowing his feet through the snow while lost in thought.

‘Talk to me about how Sandy found you,’ Pitch said, abruptly.

Way to ruin the moment, Pitch.

‘I wasn’t trying to – I mean, I just wanted to turn my brain off for a while. You’ve seen me fall out of the sky before. You’ve been the *reason* for me falling out of the sky before. It doesn’t matter how hard I hit the ground, I get back up again. I would’ve been fine.’

‘You could have died,’ Pitch said, looking at Jack hard.

‘No, I couldn’t. Immortal, right? The Nain Rouge might be able to knock me off with her creepy power, but falls from the sky won’t do it.’

Pitch ran a hand through his hair and looked at the sky as though answers were printed above him.

‘What?’ Jack said, uncomfortable. ‘I’m sorry I scared you, okay? I wasn’t having the greatest night last night, and-’

‘You don’t know your limits anymore!’ Pitch exploded, turning to him and glaring venom in his direction. ‘That *means* something, Jack! It means more than you not being able to make as much frost as you used to. It means that you might not be immortal in the way that you used to be. You don’t *know* if you could have died. She took some of your *life-force*. What do you think that means? That’s not a frivolous term. It has the word ‘life’ in it for a reason. Are you seriously – I can’t believe I’m saying this – are you telling me you hadn’t *considered* this?’

Jack’s mouth dropped open. But Pitch wasn’t done.

‘How is it that you’re so knowledgeable about some matters, and yet *so*- Did nobody teach you *anything*?’

‘No!’ Jack shouted. Pitch only just side-stepped the frost lightning that weaved wildly from his staff. ‘When was I supposed to be learning all of this, huh? Was it in the first few decades when, I don’t know, *no one could see me*? Or was it meant to be during the time I spent at that awesome Guardian School that doesn’t exist? Oh, I know! It was probably when-’

‘Decades? As in plural?’ Pitch said, staring at Jack as though he was hoping it wasn’t quite true.

‘I hardly see how that matters, okay? I don’t know why you’re so *fixated* on that. All the years of people not seeing you start to look the same after a while. It wasn’t like it was fantastic for the three centuries afterwards either, when a few spirits could see me but didn’t really seem that fussed about it. I didn’t wake up into some stupid destiny, like you did. I wasn’t raised to conquer some huge enemy, I didn’t go to warrior school. No one sat me down with a cute little book and read me the story of: ‘Oh, so the Nain Rouge sucked your soul out through your *throat*.’ Okay? I missed whatever primers there might be. If there’s a manual on ‘how to be a frost spirit,’ I never saw it. If there’s some crash course in immortality, I never took it.’

Jack’s breathing was ragged. He wanted to keep shouting, but he was running out of things to say, and he *hated* talking about this stuff, and he’d probably said enough. Pitch spent all this time poking at what it meant for Jack to be alone for so long, but he still didn’t get it.

‘And yet last night you blew me like you have a *Masters*,’ Pitch said, unexpectedly dry.

Jack wondered if he’d heard correctly, and then he laughed. It jumped out of him, a surprised burst of sound. And then he raised a hand to his face and started to giggle. Pitch joined him a moment later, chuckling. Jack couldn’t stop for at least a minute, and then his laughter tapered off, and he grinned.

‘Uh. Thanks for the compliment, I guess?’

‘I believe the one who should be grateful for that is me,’ Pitch said, his wry smile transforming for just a second into something genuine and bright.

More time passed as they faced each other. Jack wondered, *What now?* And he realised that Pitch was right – damn it – he didn’t know what his limits were anymore. Not only that, but Pitch had thought – after feeling the loss of Seraphina all over again – that Jack had wanted to die. It wasn’t that simple. Jack had wanted to unplug his brain, and that was the only way he could think to do it, but it wouldn’t have looked that way to Pitch. He imagined Sandy returning to the Workshop, explaining how he’d found Jack falling through the sky, no staff in sight. He sighed.

‘I was presumptuous,’ Pitch said. ‘I assumed that you knew more than you did, and I am sorry. I don’t seem to be my best, rational self, after last night.’

‘Not like you couldn’t already tell, but: Me either.’

‘I never got a chance to tell you how sorry I am about Mora. I know that Sandy can bring her back, he told us when he returned, but... I am sorry. I was fond of her too. But I know that you were both particularly close.’

Jack walked up to Pitch and then unselfconsciously leaned his forehead against the top of his arm. It was getting easier to do these things, to seek contact and not fear the moment of transparency when the other person just passed through him. He was beginning to accept that Pitch was solid and real. He didn’t know how long Pitch would stick around, or when he’d start to get bored, but he’d take advantage of what he could get while he could get it.

Pitch's arm came up and drew Jack closer, so that Jack was resting his forehead on Pitch's collarbone instead. The snow was wet under Jack's feet, Pitch's body heat was melting it.

'Are there any other surprises?' Jack said, 'Anything else I missed in my spotty education?'

'Yes,' Pitch said, a thread of sadness turning his voice strained. 'One thing.'

'Alright. Bring it on, then.'

Jack mentally braced himself. What else was left?

'I said, once, that I had always suspected that the initiation – the rifts we made in our souls to learn how to understand the darkness – made me particularly prone to being possessed by the shadows. And you now have a rift in your soul.'

Jack inhaled sharply when he realised what Pitch was saying. Pitch's arm tightened around his shoulder, possibly in response to his fear. Jack stared out at a drift of snow – higher than usual due to the snowstorms he'd caused overnight – and then closed his eyes, trying to block out the world.

As he replayed the events of the previous evening, he remembered how wild Pitch had looked when he'd barrelled into Jack's room, when Mora had disintegrated. his heart hitched, and something occurred to him.

'You know, I wish that Sandy could do for you what he's doing for me.'

I wish he could remake Seraphina for you.

Pitch pulled Jack close with both arms, and Jack got a face full of robe for his trouble.

'Oh, Jack,' he said, a strange wonder in his raw voice. 'The Nain Rouge, she didn't take any of your heart, did she?'

There didn't seem to be anything left to say, after that.

*

In the early afternoon, Jack watched Pitch pace by the front entrance to the Workshop. He was dressed to meet Gwyn; wearing his boots, his sheathed sword. They were going to train together. Pitch was going to try and teach him how to produce the golden light. Pitch hadn't seemed nervous about it, but now that Jack could watch him unobtrusively from a higher level, leaning over a wrought iron railing, he could see that the pacing was a way of dealing with stress.

He'd noticed from the first time that he'd seen Pitch interact with Gwyn, that Pitch admired the man. Was it just that he was a warrior? Was it that shiny, glowing charm that seemed to capture the hearts of everyone near him? Or was it something else? Gwyn treated him with the utmost respect, but Pitch seemed to have come to some sort of positive conclusion about him even before then. He wondered if they'd met before.

He was curious, too. He wasn't used to seeing Pitch interact with anyone except the Guardians, and that was tense at best. Gwyn and Pitch talked as equals, and Gwyn never acted remotely concerned that Pitch would become possessed again, or that his loyalties would change.

Jack was also worried about something else, though he tried to ignore it. He imagined Pitch and Gwyn suddenly realising that they were two of a kind, and that would be it – Jack would be forgotten – and Pitch and Gwyn would turn into some light-producing power couple. Gwyn

was...striking. Jack would be an idiot not to see it, no matter how much the fae rubbed him the wrong way. Pitch had never said anything about it, but who *didn't* find Gwyn handsome?

There was a huge, booming knock on the door, and the yeti looked through some hidden peephole and the heavy doors were pulled open. Pitch stopped pacing immediately and stood on the centre of the heavy tiles, waiting. Gwyn entered, and then – to Jack's surprise – about twenty armoured soldiers entered as well. They formed four rows of five behind Gwyn, and each had various weapons with them. Bows, swords, daggers, and more besides. Jack could see that Pitch was surprised too. He looked between the soldiers and Gwyn.

He couldn't tell what they were saying, but it looked like Gwyn was asking if the soldiers could stick around and train as well. After a few minutes of talking with Gwyn, Pitch suddenly drew himself up and began issuing commands to the soldiers *and* Gwyn.

When Pitch strode outside, the others followed him. Jack suddenly realised that Pitch hadn't just been a warrior, he'd been a General. It was the first time he'd ever seen him take charge of a group of hardened, battle-ready, armour-clad women and men. He'd made it look easy. If Jack hadn't seen him nervously pacing beforehand, he would never have guessed that Pitch had been unsure of himself.

Jack flew up through the Workshop, dodging yeti and flying toys and hanging lights. He shot through his room and out of his broken window. He circled around the Workshop lightly and kept to the shadows, hoping that Pitch wouldn't notice him. He crept down a gleaming, copper roof, and then noticed North, doing his best to look surreptitious. He was on a high balcony that hugged one of the towers, it overlooked the training arena where the yeti practiced their own combat arts. It was where Pitch and Gwyn were headed. It looked like North was also interested to see how Pitch and Gwyn would interact with each other. He'd been there a while. There was an empty plate covered in cookie crumbs by his side, an empty mug of what looked like hot chocolate.

'Ha, you too?' Jack said, and North looked around with a grin, as though he knew Jack had been there the entire time. North always looked so pleased to see Jack, and it left a soft, fuzzy sensation inside of him, like powder soft snow.

'Not every day you see a once-Nightmare-King train with the leader of the Seelie fae, yes? Better than movies.'

'Movies? Yeah, I suppose I could see that,' Jack said, joining North and checking to see if Pitch had noticed them. He hadn't. He had directed the soldiers to stand in rank nearby, and was inspecting Gwyn's sword, looking at its balance, shifting it in his hands. Eventually he handed it back to Gwyn and nodded in approval. 'You getting the elves to make you a ton of popcorn, and wearing out the DVD for *A Christmas Carol*.'

North laughed quietly. His whole body still moved with the motion, as though his legs were laughing too.

'It is almost like you are mind-reader,' North said, and then his smile faltered. 'Which is not something I am myself.'

'We're going to have a big talk now, aren't we?' Jack said, groaning, watching as an elf popped up through a tiny trapdoor in the floor and pushed a new plate of fresh cookies in North's direction before disappearing with one of the cookies in his hand.

'Maybe we could just watch for a while?' North said, as Pitch began to step through one of his sword drills slowly, and Gwyn began to copy the movement. Pitch wasn't even attempting to

produce the light, he was just showing him the steps. Gwyn had amazing physical memory. He only needed to see a step once before being able to copy it. And once Pitch realised, he moved through the drills faster, adjusting to Gwyn's skill.

Jack couldn't help but smile when Gwyn and Pitch started the drill again, and they both stepped through it almost in perfect synchronisation. Towards the end, Pitch stopped Gwyn by holding up a hand, and then walked over and repositioned his arm slightly, indicated that he should turn his foot in more.

'Pitch knows what he's doing,' North said, quietly. 'He is very good. I know something of swords, and he is very good.'

'They both are,' Jack said. 'Do you think Gwyn will be able to make the light?'

'I am hoping so,' North said, poking through the cookies until he found a chocolate chip. He offered it to Jack, who shook his head.

'So, uh, sorry for probably...scaring the crap out of you yesterday?' Jack said, and North brushed crumbs off his beard as he faced Jack and frowned.

'Ah, no. Jack. This is not the way I imagined this going. You were upset, and we – your friends – not only did not understand why, we were responsible. Who owes who an apology?'

'Well, if you knew how close I was to just losing it and destroying your Workshop, I think-'

'You think I didn't know? Couldn't see?' North said, looking back out at Gwyn and Pitch. 'I know when someone has found the end of their tether.'

'Oh. Well, yeah. Sorry. I mean, I'm glad I didn't do anything to hurt your toy factory and all, because it's a pretty sweet place. But...'

Jack trailed off when he saw the expression on North's face. His eyes were creased up at the edges, he was frowning. Even all the facial hair couldn't hide the wince. Jack swallowed.

'You've always done really well by me,' Jack said quietly. 'I don't want this to be some big...thing, where you tell me you feel really guilty when, you...I *know* you would have taken me in, if I'd asked for it. And I know that if I'd just sat down and explained why it was so hard when Jamie, god, when he...I know you would have been good about that too. Okay? You've always been the first to check how I'm going, and it means something. So, can we just skip the part where you tell me whatever you're going to tell me, and get to the part where we don't talk about it anymore?'

'No,' North said heavily, turning away from Pitch completely and facing Jack. 'I am thinking, no.'

'I don't get what the big deal is,' Jack said, stubbornly.

'You don't know how to *ask*, Jack,' North said, quietly. 'I have been thinking, actually, that it doesn't matter if you are knowing that I would do all these things for you, if you do not know how to ask. I made a mistake, I thought, 'Jack will open up to me when he is ready,' and I did not know about how alone you had been, or how...when most people think 'I will go to someone for help,' you think 'How nice that I have people I can go to for help, now I will deal with this horrible thing alone.''

Jack watched North, wary. North was being so gentle, even though his tone was fierce.

'Even now, right now, you watch me like something terrible is going to happen. You say that you

know I would do all these things for you, but, Jack, you can't *imagine* the things I would be happy to do for you, in a single beating of my heart, in an instant. You look at me like this, and I think, 'How could he know?' And I was with the reindeer, in the early hours of the morning, when a thought struck me. Bam! A thought that went like this: After all this time, with no one believing in you, when did you stop believing in everyone else?'

Jack's mouth went dry. He swallowed and tried to find anything else to look at except the expression on North's face. He ended up focusing on a mountain peak. His lungs hurt. He didn't know what to say. How would North react if he responded, *Yeah, actually, I kind of gave up. Okay? Happy?*

North wouldn't like that at all.

When Jack felt fingers tug on his sleeve, almost playful, he closed his eyes. He was not going to cry *again*, damn it. Couldn't he go just twenty four hours without turning into a wreck? Hell, just six?

'I have a secret,' North whispered. 'And the secret is this: I don't *need* you to believe in me. And I am not *angry* that you do not believe in me. And you can take as long as you want, not believing in me. A hundred years. Two hundred. A thousand. And you can still look at me like the way you just did. And it will hurt my heart every time, but I will *never* be angry. I am not going to punish you, Jack, for not believing in me.'

Jack squeezed his eyes shut, refused to let any tears forth. Fingers were still intermittently tugging on his sleeve for emphasis. The same hands that could wield sabres and lovingly chip away at blocks of ice to create great beauty.

'Why not?' Jack said. He closed his mouth, his teeth clicked, but it was too late. He'd said the words.

Silence stretched out. So much that Jack felt like he wasn't so close to crying. He risked opening his eyes a little, and then he turned and looked at North. When he saw the pained look on his face, he choked out a laugh.

'This is kind of why I wanted to skip this part of the conversation,' Jack said.

North smiled and looked like he was going to say something else, when a flash of golden light lit up the training arena. Jack turned quickly, and his heart leapt in his chest.

Pitch was making the light on his own. He didn't need the snowballs anymore.

'Look at that!' North breathed with pure wonder. 'I know I have seen it before, but I was distracted at the time. The light is so beautiful. No?'

'Right?' Jack agreed. 'It's just *pretty*.'

They watched in silence for some time. Gwyn must have been trying to produce the light, but it wasn't working. Jack didn't think it would work in a single training session; not given what Pitch had to go through in order to produce it himself. But still, he was trying. As Gwyn tried, repeating certain gestures, Pitch was speaking to the other soldiers, explaining something, moving his arms and hands for emphasis. The soldiers responded to him like he hadn't ever been the Nightmare King, like he was their General.

'He really was made for this, wasn't he?' Jack said.

North nodded. As they continued to watch, Jack almost started to feel normal again. Or at least, the

new normal that he was growing accustomed to. He didn't feel close to tears anymore. And his mind kept replaying North's words. The idea that North would not judge him for his lack of faith, his own lack of belief, was shocking to him.

'If he ever hurts you, I will ruin him,' North said, suddenly. Jack blinked hard.

'What?'

'It is nothing,' North said, and then he laughed. 'Or should I just tell you that I know? I have seen the way you look at him. How you have looked at him for some time. You know, I wondered the first time he came to the Workshop and you defended him? I wondered then.'

'No way,' Jack said, horrified. 'I didn't even know then. You take that back!'

North laughed again and shook his head.

'And I have seen the way he looks at you.'

'Yeah?' Jack said, taking a deep breath and looking back out to the arena. Something was fluttering and alive in his chest, and he couldn't make it stop. It was so strange to be having this conversation with anyone, let alone North.

'That man loves you,' North said, with no trace of uncertainty in his voice. 'And if you hurt *him*, Jack. That will probably make me angry.'

'How would I hurt *him*?' Jack said, trying to imagine it and failing. North's words kept chasing themselves around in his head. *That man loves you*. Did he? How could North tell? What had Pitch said to him? Pitch would never say something like that, would he? And why would he love *Jack*? Maybe it wasn't love. It was probably just infatuation, or like, or lust, or something. Jack didn't even know if he felt the same way. It made his head spin.

'I have learned something, of the world. I have learned that when someone thinks they don't matter, they begin to think their actions don't matter. They are believing that they leave no impact on the world. They believe that they do not last inside the hearts of others. But I am telling you this – in confidence, because I do not think he would be happy to know I am telling you this – that you are a lasting light inside of his heart.'

He cleared his throat.

'You are like...the biggest romantic. I swear. Pitch and I haven't even, we haven't even talked about this stuff. It's not even like that. It's just a thing. I don't even know *what* it is. I don't even know if we're friends. I don't even know why he'd like *me*. And I don't mean that in a self-deprecating, like, 'Oh, poor Jack, no attractive qualities' way. I mean seriously. Look at him. Down there. With like the *King* of the Seelie Court. He looks like he's always belonged with them. With these grand, noble warriors who have all this inner strength and dignity and... then there's me. And I hate deadlines, and strategy meetings, and planning, and I think being dignified is over-rated, and...'

'The heart wants what it wants,' North said, on a smile. 'Maybe Pitch needs someone who isn't so much like him.'

'How are you okay with this? I thought you'd be...I thought you'd revoke my Guardian status or something.'

Jack said it on a grin to hide the fact that he'd been seriously scared that North was going to do

exactly that. But it didn't matter how much light-heartedness he infused into it, North's face went from affectionate to horrified in a second.

'*Jack*,' North said.

'Because, you know, he was the Nightmare King,' Jack continued in a rush, feeling suddenly out of his depth. He'd admitted too much. He'd said too much. He wanted to do anything to erase that look of North's face. 'But obviously he's okay now. He's not so... will you stop *looking* at me like that?'

'Like what?' North said.

'Like...I don't know. Like what I said was so shocking. It's *not*.'

'Is it not?' North said, sceptically. 'That you would think I would do something like that? That is shocking to *me*.'

'I don't want to argue about this with you,' Jack said, desperately.

'Then do not argue. Listen. I am not angry with you, that you think these things. But you are also having to understand that I am chagrined that I ever gave you the impression that I would do these things, that-'

'I *know* you wouldn't, okay? I know that. I just worried. That's all. I don't think you're some monster, it's not like that.' Jack was starting to feel sick. It spun through him and left him dizzy. He didn't like this power that he had to hurt other people. He hated it. It was better if people didn't know what he was thinking, because North had never looked at him like *that* until today.

Down in the arena, the light that Pitch was producing suddenly stopped. Jack looked down over the balcony at the exact same moment that Pitch's eyes searched him out. He lowered his sword, and watched Jack, a serious expression on his face. A moment later Gwyn followed his gaze and raised his hand to them both in acknowledgement. Gwyn went back to doing drills, but Pitch still hadn't looked away.

'I have scared you,' North said in realisation, looking between the two of them. 'What scared you? Am I allowed to ask this? Please?'

North framed the questions so gently, that Jack broke eye contact with Pitch and faced him.

'Is it that you think I am angry with you?' North continued, 'Look into my eyes, Jack. No anger.'

'No, I know that,' Jack said. And just like that, he was exhausted. After the morning he'd had, and his conversation with Pitch. Now this. He was just *tired*. 'I don't want to hurt anyone. I just don't want to hurt you, okay? Sue me. I don't have many...friends. The last thing I want to do is hurt them.'

'Ah, this is good. This I can work with,' North said, eyes lighting up. 'Because *this* is something I understand from living it. That fear you have. In your belly. In your heart. That fear you have of hurting your friends? I have it too. I have it when I realise I have hurt you. And it is so awful, yes? And it will never go away. Even when you believe in us, even when you have faith in us.'

Jack passed a hand over his eyes and shook his head.

'You make me feel like I think the craziest things,' Jack said, the words feeling wrung out of him. 'But you don't know, North. The things I think...they're normal to me. They're normal until they

accidentally slip out and then you look at me the way you just looked at me. It makes me feel like...'

Jack couldn't finish. He looked down when he felt a tug on his sleeve, and smiled weakly when North tugged again.

'How does it make you feel, when I look at you like that?'

'Like...okay. That maybe the last three hundred years... Maybe that wasn't okay. Which, on the one hand, I feel like that anyway. But it's different when you wish things were different but still kind of secretly think you maybe had it coming. That you maybe did something to make it happen. But the fact that...that maybe others think it wasn't okay, it does something that *hurts*. That, maybe, all this time, there were people out there who didn't want me to be living like that and I didn't *know*, and...'

Jack had to stop. His voice had choked up. He closed his eyes again. Maybe it was just going to be the day for no self-control. Maybe it was a day for tantrums and tears and feeling like his head was muddled up and it wouldn't go back to the way it was.

'If I could undo all that time, for you, I would,' North said, voice rough. 'Jack, you are a lasting light in *my* heart, too.'

'Could you be anymore sentimental?' Jack said, voice thick, eyes swimming.

'Yes,' North said emphatically. 'I am toning it down.'

Jack laughed, even as he thumbed tears out of his eyes.

'Of course you are,' Jack muttered. He was absurdly grateful that North hadn't mentioned or drawn attention to the fact that Jack was crying.

'I am,' North insisted. 'You are having no idea.'

'Stop it, you're not toning it down at all. You're just a big, mawkish softie.'

North laughed, and the sound rung out loudly. He sounded delighted by the interpretation. The next moment, he and Jack made corresponding sounds of awe as Pitch sent a huge swipe of golden light out into the world. It detached from his sword, swept through the arena, left sparkling honey-gold light soaked into everything it touched. Pitch stopped then and leaned on his sword, Jack thought he looked tired. Gwyn and the soldiers were inspecting the light that still gleamed on the ground, the walls of the Workshop.

'I was not understanding, at first,' North said, almost to himself. 'You and Pitch, I could not make it fit in my mind. But these days things are different. Everything is changing. And if we do not change with it, we will be left behind. Defeating evil, Jack. It's not just about big weapons and bluster, though I once thought it was. It is about finding the moments of wonder amongst the darkness. When I remember this, I find it no problem at all to accept the space that you and Pitch have made for each other.'

Jack reached down to the platter of cookies and picked up a lepeski cookie, picking off the slivers of almond and eating them one by one.

They watched the training for another three hours, until it was obvious that Pitch was spent from his effort.

Jack stayed up on the balcony long after North had left him with a fresh platter of cookies by his side. He stayed up there long after Pitch had walked back into the Workshop and Gwyn and the soldiers had left.

He had a lot to think about.

Only Skin Between Us

Chapter Notes

Thank you ever so much, for kudos, bookmarks and subscriptions. And, by the by, the comments on the last chapter were mind-blowing. Comments are like... mmm. Comments.

This is a really long chapter. It's so long you might want to settle down with a blanket or some hot chocolate.

Pitch, it turned out, was a workaholic.

Every day, Gwyn and his soldiers came, and every day they drilled together in the training arena, or even further out on the snowfields. And late at night, Pitch would pore over books or write strategies or do research, fall asleep in his own bed, insensate until the morning, when it would start all over again.

Jack worried for two reasons. Firstly, it didn't seem like much time had passed at all before Jack's fear that Pitch would spend all of his time with warriors like him had come true. He knew the training was important, but it changed the dynamic. Jack didn't like to be down there in the way, and Pitch was often so preoccupied at night, they didn't see each other that often. And, secondly, something seemed off. Jack couldn't help but remember how Pitch had broken down the first time he'd produced the golden light with his sword. How it had hurt him to do something he didn't feel like he deserved anymore.

Now he was pushing himself to make the golden light every day. Jack knew all about how people worked too hard to hide from the truth. That's what snow days and unexpected snowstorms were for. But that wouldn't have worked in this case. The soldiers worked through snowfall, and Pitch probably wouldn't have appreciated Jack's idea of an interruption.

He seemed so serious about everything, all of a sudden. Which was a weird thing to observe. Pitch had always been serious. But then, he'd always made time for Jack, too.

*

One evening, Jack was tired of giving Pitch his space to train. Jack walked into his room, where Pitch was hunched in his armchair, poring over a book. He pulled the book directly out of his hands, then tossed it behind him.

Pitch blinked at him. He looked *tired*, Jack realised. There were dark smudges under his eyes, a constant tightness around the corner of his mouth.

'I can just see it,' Jack said. 'You train so hard over the next two weeks, that by the time some big confrontation comes? You're too tired to be any use.'

Pitch scowled at him.

'I'm worried about you,' Jack added. 'Not that you couldn't tell, of course, because of your fear thing. But you just... all day? Really? Are you just falling for that charm thing that Gwyn does?'

Jack blocked Pitch as he went to stand up, he held out his staff like he was corralling a sheep.

‘You could just sit down and do nothing for like five minutes. The world isn’t going to end.’

‘Jack-’

‘Gwyn wouldn’t even know, actually. No one would. Just you and me. Imagine that, right? You just sitting there without writing something or reading something or training or *something*.’

Pitch folded his arms and pushed himself back in the chair, and then glared.

‘It’s strange,’ Jack said, speculative. ‘You working so hard. You remember that day? The first day you made the light with the sword? Because I remember.’

Pitch’s glare shifted into something uncomfortable, and his arms tensed around his torso. It was so obvious now, Jack wished he had thought to do this on the second or third night. But no, he’d been so insecure, and he had wanted to be respectful. He knew enough about warriors to know they needed space to train, to do their thing.

He’d missed something so obvious.

He leaned his staff against the wall and then climbed into the chair, remembering that the last time he’d been this close to Pitch in an armchair, it was to fall asleep against him after a mind-blowing hand job.

Seriously, Jack, concentrate.

He pushed his arms around Pitch, digging them underneath Pitch’s arms. He pushed his face into his collarbone. He felt, for a second, like a small winter animal burrowing down and hiding from the worst of the weather. He rubbed his face against the robe, breathed in cinnamon and spices, something oily and metallic.

‘It hurts you all the time, doesn’t it?’ Jack said, his own arms tensing when Pitch’s twitched. ‘I can’t make snow days without thinking about Jamie anymore. You can’t make that light without thinking about-’

‘That’s enough,’ Pitch said.

‘You’re not leaving any time for the good things in your life. Is it because you think you don’t deserve them? I even saw some cinnamon cookies that you missed the other day.’

‘I don’t need some three hundred year old spirit performing *literal* armchair pop psychology on me or my motives, thank you very much. Now if you would kindly de-limpet yourself from my person...’

Jack wriggled closer, and then looked up to see the angle of Pitch’s jawbone, the shadows that lurked between his neck and shoulders.

‘You work too hard,’ Jack said. ‘And remember? You could just tell me. Everyone seems to think this talking thing is a big deal. Even *you* think it’s a big deal. You all want me to talk more? You should lead by example. You should walk the walk, if you’re going to talk to the talk.’

‘Dear *god* you are annoying,’ Pitch muttered.

‘Really annoying. But, hey, I know what it’s like to have some really annoying person pushing

your buttons *all the time*, so I'm going to give you a get-out-of-jail-free pass. You don't have to tell me. But you can't keep doing this to yourself. You don't have to punish yourself, like this. It's getting to you. You have nightmares, you know. I hear them, sometimes.'

Jack shivered when Pitch pushed his chin gently into Jack's hair. It was pointy, warm, and he pushed up a little, nudging. Pitch sighed.

He almost thought that Pitch was going to talk about it. Instead, Pitch said nothing. His body relaxed by degrees into his chair. After about ten minutes, he loosened one of his arms underneath Jack's body, and then wrapped it around Jack's torso instead. It was a warm, heavy band, it made Jack's thoughts muzzy. It was hard to remember that he was concentrating and trying to do the right thing. There was warmth along the front of his body, warmth at the back, a warm point resting on top of his head.

Jack closed his eyes, his head sank into a more comfortable position. His hands squeezed at Pitch's sides, and Pitch squeezed back, fingers splaying against his ribcage.

He wasn't going to sleep. It was just...warm, the robe felt heavy and familiar, and he was used to Pitch's scent now, and he didn't know when he'd get the chance to do this again. Pitch hadn't even really acknowledged any of Jack's worries. He had no idea if anything he said had sunk in, or if he'd just made a fool of himself.

They both fell asleep at the same time.

When Jack woke up, it was morning. He was alone in the armchair and he could hear the distant sound of swords clashing against each other. A sparring session in the training arena. They were at it again already.

Jack sighed, and decided to spend the day outside.

*

On his way out, North told him not to go too far, so Jack ended up in a snowfield a small way from the training arena itself. He could hear the sounds of soldiers shouting encouragement to each other, of metal ringing against metal.

Impulsively, he started to create frost lightning. He wanted to see what his new limits were; as Pitch said, he didn't really know them anymore. It was a good way to get rid of his frustration.

After about an hour, Jack whirled in mid-air and then stopped when he saw a warrior clad in creamy-white armour walking towards him, making his way through the heavy snow like it was a light dusting on solid ground. *Magic*, Jack thought, watching. As he got closer, Jack's jaw tightened. It was the King of the Seelie Court.

Jack didn't let Gwyn see his grimace.

Awesome, he has lecture face.

Gwyn stopped near Jack, then bent and picked up a piece of fallen frost-lightning. It was a shard of clear, blue ice. He turned it in his fingers. When he finally made eye contact with Jack, his face was grim. Even now, Jack felt soothed by Gwyn's inner light. He didn't want to be, but there it was. It was like looking into the face of the sun and expecting not to be warmed.

'Pitch says that if we go on the offensive, you are coming with us. Is that right?'

‘Yep,’ Jack said, twirling his staff.

‘You should train with us,’ Gwyn said, though it wasn’t a suggestion. It had the flavour of command all the way through it.

‘No offence, but I would rather stand under an eave of icicles during the spring melt.’

Gwyn narrowed his eyes. *Lecture face*, Jack thought. It was exactly the same expression he’d seen when Gwyn had started giving him a hard time about visiting the Nain Rouge. But just because the guy was a King, and handsome, and probably used to getting his own way all the time, didn’t mean that Jack was suddenly going to start doing what he said.

‘Not many people would turn down the chance to train with me,’ Gwyn said, forcing some evenness into his voice.

Jack remained stubbornly silent. If Gwyn wanted to have this conversation, Jack wasn’t going to make it easy on him. He didn’t think someone should be treated great just because they exuded glamour and charm without batting an eyelid. Gwyn had done him no personal favours, either. He could tell that he thought of him as just some out of control kid.

‘I’ve met creatures like you before,’ Gwyn said, and though Jack bristled at being called a creature, Gwyn sounded less judgemental. ‘A single glimpse of formal education and they disappear.’

‘Yep,’ Jack said. ‘I’m a ‘creature’ like that.’

‘There are ways around it,’ Gwyn said, ‘if you’re curious. You could train near us. Out of sight. Make up your own rules. Do it for only as long as you want to. Take the pressure off. It doesn’t have to be anything more than honing your craft.’

‘Honing my *craft*?’ Jack said, laughing. ‘You think I can do this faster somehow? How formal do you think *this* is?’

Jack clapped his hand around his staff and pointed it up at the sky. The frost lightning that split out of the wood shot high and far, carving jagged, damaging slashes into the blue. Jack knew – even as he’d done it – that he was showing off. Even now, he was trying to *impress* Gwyn. He bit his tongue as he lowered his staff, ignored the sudden wash of fatigue.

Gwyn watched as the frost fell to the ground around them, a thoughtful expression in the tilt of his head.

‘Everyone has something they can work on. You know you have something to work on.’

‘Why do you care, anyway?’

‘I don’t want you jeopardising missions,’ Gwyn said, and then raised a hand imperiously when Jack started to retort. ‘I don’t think you want that either. You’re no idiot, no matter how much you act like one. I could help you, Jack.’

‘I don’t want your help,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘I’m pretty sure it’ll just involve a lot of really stern looks and lectures. And since I have a pretty good imagination, I can just *pretend* that’s what’s happening, and I’d still learn just as much anyway.’

Gwyn nodded as though Jack had said something interesting.

‘I’ve invited Pitch on a Hunt with me, as a way of saying thank you. Come with us.’

‘A Hunt?’ Jack said, confused.

‘We ride out into the night, and hunt down the immortal White Stag for the thrill of the chase. No training. Informal. After that you can decide for yourself. Being the King of the Seelie Fae doesn’t present me in my best light. But this would be more than that. It’s...fun. It is a wild, full night. There’s usually a lot of ale afterwards. Your frost would be welcome.’

‘So I can become a tool in your toolbox? Is this just you making sure you don’t rule anything or anyone out? Exploring every avenue?’

Gwyn shrugged.

‘I underestimated you,’ Gwyn said. ‘I think you underestimate yourself. Jack, it’s just one night. I can’t make you, but...’

Gwyn’s lips thinned. Jack realised that Gwyn was uncomfortable, and suddenly got that sense that he was finding the whole conversation difficult. It was hard to read Gwyn sometimes, because he was either projecting a focused seriousness, or because Jack was getting too caught up in the charm, in the filaments of light that worked their way into him. And even his glamour, as soothing as it was, felt off somehow. He didn’t want to think of Gwyn as handsome, it was just...wrong.

‘I’ll go,’ Jack said, sighing. ‘Fine, I’ll go. Once.’

‘Excellent,’ Gwyn said, his face splitting into an almost shy smile, some inner glow flaring around him, making him look like a Renaissance painting. Jack had the horrible feeling that he’d reflect on this conversation in about an hour and feel like smashing his head repeatedly against a wall. ‘Pitch will let you know when it’s happening. I look forward to it!’

Gwyn walked off without a look backwards, and Jack felt dismissed.

And then Gwyn was back.

‘Spar with me,’ Gwyn said, a challenging, playful light in his eyes.

‘Seriously? That sounded like a threat. ‘Hey, Jack, come get your ass kicked by the King of the Seelie Fae.’ As much as I’d like to kick *your* ass, though. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not exactly at my best these days.’

Gwyn offered him a charming, teeth-heavy smile and Jack felt his heart thumping rapidly in his chest. He could practically feel the glamour oozing off him. Could the fae *make* it? That definitely felt more intense than usual. *Oh no you don’t, you son of a bitch.*

‘That’s how you do everything, isn’t it? Flash a smile. Did you even have to do anything to get elected as King? Or did you just flash some pearly whites and look like a toothpaste commercial?’

Gwyn’s eyes glittered, and his smile edged into something dangerous.

‘Don’t get too ahead of yourself, frost spirit.’

‘If you can’t handle a little banter, maybe we shouldn’t spar,’ Jack said, lightly. He tried to hold back his impish grin, but he couldn’t help it. This was fun.

Gwyn laughed. The sound rolled through him, unexpectedly rough. It was a broad laugh, one that caused him to arch his spine and throw his head back. When he straightened, the smile wasn’t dangerous at all, though it was still fey and wild.

‘We should definitely spar,’ Gwyn said.

‘You’re pushing him too hard,’ Jack said, seeing an opening and taking it. ‘You’d be an idiot not to see it. And you still can’t make the light. So if you push him too hard? You’re going to lose an asset. You’re going to break one of the tools in your toolbox. I might not do your little round table meetings, but I know *that*.’

Gwyn’s smile disappeared, his brow furrowed.

‘I asked him. He said he needed to push himself, to build up his stamina.’

‘Maybe he does,’ Jack said, ‘I don’t know. But look me in the eyes and tell me you think he’s not pushing himself too hard, and that you don’t have something to do with that. Encouraging him. Using your charm as some kind of trump card so that you have a better chance of making that light too. The longer you keep him out there? The less he can touch base with the people who really get him.’

‘And that would be you, would it?’ Gwyn said. He didn’t sound angry. He looked thoughtful.

‘Yeah, maybe. I don’t know, okay? I just know that you *really* want to make that light. Everyone knows that. And I know that he really wants to impress you, though he’d probably slaughter me for saying as much.

‘We want to impress each other,’ Gwyn said, scratching uncertainly at the back of his head. ‘That’s what we do. Warriors compete. It’s camaraderie. You push at each other until you get the results you want.’

‘Well, whatever. I’m no warrior.’ Jack felt uncomfortable.

‘No, you...’ Gwyn squinted at Jack like he couldn’t quite believe something. ‘You may be right.’

Jack felt really uncomfortable. He thought he’d be happier to get Gwyn on the back foot, but instead he felt like he’d stepped over some boundary. He wasn’t used to intervening like this, and he was pretty sure Pitch could look after himself. *But if he could, wouldn’t he be doing it already?*

‘Don’t tell him I said that to you,’ Jack said, quickly.

‘If you come with us on a Hunt, you have a deal,’ Gwyn said, and Jack rolled his eyes.

‘I already said I was going, didn’t I?’

‘So you did. But I’ve seen that look on faces before. You were going to weasel your way out of it. I truly think you’ll have a great time if you come. It’s nothing like training. And after that, maybe, we can spar. Hm?’

It was like Gwyn was trying to be nice to him, be friendly towards him, which didn’t make any sense. Gwyn had no reason to be friends with Jack, and it was obvious that their core essences were at odds with each other. Gwyn would probably hate Jack even more if his powers were at their full strength and he had more fun and play immediately accessible. He honestly thought that Gwyn was wasting his time.

He watched as Gwyn walked away again, and shook his head. At least Gwyn seemed to have heard his concerns about Pitch, and that was something. It would be a good thing if Pitch had more people in his corner.

*

The next day, Jack spent some time alone in North's library, trailing his fingers over the velvety and leathery spines of books and hoping that the tiny amount of frost that curled over them would just disappear and leave them unharmed. He didn't want to read anything in particular, but sometimes a title jumped out at him, he'd scan a few chapters.

He was rising higher and higher on the wind, eschewing a stepladder. Eventually, he pulled a book out on Baba Yaga and started flicking through it.

He jumped and almost dropped the book when he felt a warm hand close around his ankle. He looked down as Pitch reeled him back towards the ground like a wayward balloon.

'What are you doing inside?' Jack said, swallowing when the hand on his ankle became two hands on his waist, pulling him down. Pitch's hands shifted to his shoulders and rested there. Pitch's expression was unfathomable. He looked still and composed.

'Gwyn left early. He had other things to attend to.' Pitch's expression hadn't changed, but the palms on his shoulders pressed down lightly, and fingertips dug into his back. It didn't hurt, but it was a dangerous pressure. Jack swallowed.

'Yeah? And you're not doing drills on your own? That's...not like you, these days.'

'Mm. He practically ordered me to take a break.'

'Did he?' Jack said, resisting the urge to pump his fist in the air, or jump for joy. Pitch was looking at him with nothing but absolute blankness on his face, which meant he probably suspected something. And Pitch didn't really look like he was in the mood for humour.

'Fancy that,' Pitch added.

'Right?'

Jack shivered when Pitch dropped his thumbs to Jack's collarbones and stroked along the ridges through the sweatshirt. He paused at the dip of skin between his clavicles, then let his hands relax. It was making his shoulders warm, his neck. Once again, he was struck by how quickly Pitch warmed him, how Pitch never seemed to cool down.

He swallowed again, something heavier than fear dropping through him. He wanted to know what that warmth felt like all over, how that would translate if they had sex. He didn't think he'd survive the experience, but he still wanted to know.

Something hungry had crept into Pitch's gaze.

'Gwyn said he talked to you, yesterday,' Pitch said, voice deeper, and Jack felt his shoulders twitch into a shrug, only to have them squeezed again by Pitch.

'Just the usual, you know. Train with us. Come on a Hunt. Blah blah I don't like you blah.'

Pitch leaned down and pressed his nose into the juncture between Jack's neck and jaw, and then inhaled deeply. When he straightened, he didn't straighten all the way.

'Your fear betrays you,' Pitch whispered, and Jack laughed.

'It worked didn't it? You're here now.'

'If you wanted some *attention*, Jack, you only needed to ask.'

Jack's mouth opened when lips pressed against the side of his neck, followed by a slick of tongue, searing him. His eyes drifted shut when Pitch's fingers spider-walked up the other side of his neck, creating small, sharp points of sensation. When they stroked through his hairline, Jack exhaled.

His whole body felt sensitised, like the upper layers of skin had been rubbed off.

He leaned in and...Pitch pulled away.

He withdrew his hands and offered a small smile to Jack.

'I still have things to do,' he said, and Jack could have kicked him in the shins. And then, when Pitch walked calmly away, leaving Jack tingling alone in the library, he decided he was *definitely* going to kick him in the shins.

*

The next day was not much better. Jack was in the process of icing windowpanes outside, standing on the ground and deciding to start from the bottom and work his way up to the very top, when he felt a presence behind him. He panicked, thinking it was the Nain Rouge or the Each Uisge, and started to spin around when he felt those stupidly warm hands wrap around the top of his hips.

'Easy, easy now. Just me,' Pitch whispered. 'Just me.'

Jack swallowed down a sound as he was pressed into the window in front of him. He was glad no one could see through it, because it had already been heavily iced, but *still*.

'Uh...when I said you needed to take breaks, I don't know if I meant this?' Jack said, shakily.

Jack's hand came up and he dug his fingernails into the wall when Pitch's hips pushed into his, anchoring him.

'Didn't you?' Pitch said, and Jack's head tilted backwards when a warm hand pushed underneath his sweatshirt and palmed up slowly, from the bump of his hipbone up and over his ribs. It was very slow, like a flow of lava had been unleashed along one side of his body. He felt unbalanced. He was suddenly very grateful for the support of the wall and the window.

'Not that I mind,' Jack heard himself whisper.

'Mm. Gwyn gave me something. A thank you. I almost refused, until he explained what it did. Do you want to see?'

'If it means you stop doing this, then no, not interested. Don't care.'

Pitch laughed deep in his throat, and stepped away. Jack stayed sagged against the window for a moment, and then took a deep breath and stepped away too. He was *already* hard, damn it. Pitch had done hardly anything at all.

Pitch held out his hand, and Jack saw a small, misshapen rock inside of it. It looked like a lump of coal.

Jack laughed, hoarse.

'If that's what he's paying you with, then I think-'

‘It’s one of four wards. The Seelie Court uses wards to keep the Unseelie out of nominated spaces. They’re rare, and no more can be made. This one is on loan. Placed at the threshold to a house, it means no Unseelie can enter, nor can their magic impact the environment or those within the environment. It’s only temporary, in exchange for the training.’

‘Loan?’ Jack said, staring at it. ‘That’s amazing. We could use it to keep the Unseelie Court out of North’s Workshop!’

‘Or, if you bothered to use your *imagination*, we could take it back to Kostroma, and-’

‘Oh my god,’ Jack said, realising. A house, a whole house to themselves, with no elves or yeti or North or *anyone*. A house where none of the bad guys could get to them, where the Each Uisge couldn’t even compel him out with his words. A house where there was a giant four poster bed and open windows letting the cold in, where they could... ‘Oh my god, let’s do that. Right now. Let’s go.’

Pitch chuckled.

‘Eager?’ he sounded extremely satisfied with himself. Jack didn’t even care.

‘*Right now*,’ Jack said, and Pitch shrugged and pocketed the coal.

‘Actually, I still have some things to do.’

Pitch walked off, and Jack threw his arms up in the air and then kicked the wall behind him.

‘If this is your stupid punishment for me telling Gwyn to keep an eye on you, well done. Very effective. What do you have to do that’s so important?’

Pitch chuckled again, disappearing around a corner.

*

Jack was going crazy. Pitch not only knew it, he was the cause.

Over the next few days, Pitch still trained, but he took intermittent breaks. Some of those breaks were less than ten minutes long, and they seemed to only exist for the purpose of driving Jack out of his mind.

Like the time when Jack was crawling stealthily through an elf tunnel, trying to find all the different places the stupid tunnels went to, only to find himself yanked through a trapdoor into a shadowy storage space filled with sacks of flour and sugar. It was almost completely dark, with no light except for the dim, dusty shaft coming from the elf tunnel itself.

He gasped when Pitch’s mouth pressed into his. Hands cupped his face and then one separated to stroke down his back; a hard, firm gesture that woke Jack’s whole body, left him trembling. He was afraid that Pitch was going to stop, afraid he was going to continue and they were going to get caught.

Pitch licked across Jack’s lips hungrily, then pushed his tongue into his mouth, pressing against Jack’s tongue, slicking alongside it and underneath it. Jack made an embarrassingly high noise and shoved one of his hands beneath Pitch’s robe, finding his way beneath the undershirt and feeling drunk on the skin contact. Pitch seemed drunk on it too, as the kisses became messier and less measured.

When Pitch drew back, Jack followed.

‘You can’t just disappear on me *now*,’ Jack whined, and then gasped when Pitch’s hand traced the hem of his pants.

‘Can’t I?’

Pitch disappeared, and Jack clenched his fists and took several deep breaths, because it was ridiculous, and he didn’t want it to stop. He’d never met anyone who had taken their time like this before. He loved it, he kind of hated it.

Then there was the time when Jack was half-asleep and getting ready for bed after having spent himself on creating frost lightning, wanting to see how much of it he could make in a short burst of time. He leaned his staff against the wall and was climbing into bed when a hand shot out from underneath and then pulled him down to the ground.

He started laughing – only mildly hysterical – when he realised that Pitch was *under the bed*.

‘Some habits are hard to break, huh?’ Jack whispered gleefully, and then his mirth vanished and was replaced with heat and combustion as Pitch dragged him into the darkness and pushed a knee between his legs, rolling him onto his side in the limited space and biting the side of his neck.

‘*Pitch*,’ Jack choked, suddenly not very tired at all.

Pitch hummed happily against him, pulling up his sweatshirt and hungrily mapping Jack’s body with his hands. When Pitch traced over a nipple, Jack whimpered, and he ground down against the thigh between his legs. And when Pitch pinched the sensitive flesh, Jack bucked, and slammed his head against the underside of the bed.

He hissed with pain and then poked Pitch with a sharp finger.

‘Your house,’ Jack said, ‘Kostroma. I don’t want a head injury.’

‘Don’t you?’ Pitch said, with faux-solicitousness. And then Jack was alone under his bed, in the shadows, and he pounded his fists into the floor because *damn it, damn it, damn it*. What was one head injury when he was so turned on?

He would never have told Pitch, not in a thousand years, but he was kind of enjoying the fun of it. Pitch had a sense of play. He was comfortable with his body, and he was comfortable with Jack’s. It was like he’d gotten some kind of manual about it in the mail and had read it back to back. *Maybe that’s what he’s doing when he’s reading all those stupid books at night.*

It came to a head a couple of days later, when – one afternoon – Jack was in Pitch’s room while Pitch was out, going through the books on his desk, snooping. Pitch walked in from training, took off his sword, and then watched as Jack turned the pages.

‘If I know it’s coming,’ Jack said, ‘does it still count?’

Pitch walked up to him and pulled him out of the chair, taking the book with one hand and dropping it carelessly onto the table.

‘What do you think?’ Pitch said, then kissed him.

Jack’s eyes trailed briefly to the door slightly ajar behind them, and then they closed, because he didn’t *care*. He wanted everything. He didn’t even care about Kostroma. He just wanted to feel not

so crazed with sensation, like he wasn't walking around with a permanent hard on. He could've probably taken care of it himself, but he felt like that wasn't part of the game, like Pitch would have been disappointed if he had. And he had no idea why he felt that way, or where he got that impression from, but as a result, he was starting to think about nothing else except Pitch.

Pitch backed Jack into the door, and it closed with a sharp click behind them.

Jack was already hard when Pitch wrapped his fingers around him. His vision was blurry. When Pitch's hand started moving, lighter than usual, slower, Jack arched, made noises that he'd be embarrassed to remember later.

'I can't,' Jack said suddenly, 'I can't, I'm going to, I'm-'

He exhaled on a sob when Pitch drew his hand away, and then whimpered high when Pitch pressed his hand back. It didn't start moving again, fingers didn't wrap around him, and that was even more intimate. Pitch's hand, right there, resting comfortably.

'Please,' Jack said, and Pitch pursed his lips as though he was giving it serious thought.

'Soon,' Pitch said.

'You don't need to do this, it's not like you need to *convince* me.'

'Something you need to understand about me, Jack, is that I *like* this part.'

'The part where I go crazy and you look like it's not bothering you at all?'

'If you think it's not *bothering* me, then you don't know me very well.' Pitch tugged Jack forwards and then pulled him up until their hips met. Jack gasped when he felt Pitch, hard and insistent against him.

'Please,' Jack said again, and Pitch moved his head back and looked down at him.

'Already?' he said, but it was almost as though he was saying it to himself.

'Already what? Already really turned on and kind of going crazy with it? Come on. I've been trying to wait until Kostroma, but it's not like-'

'Waiting?' Pitch said sharply, and Jack groaned as Pitch ground his hips into Jack's. 'As in, you haven't been taking yourself in hand, imagining all the things I could be doing to you?'

Oh, for the love of-

'God, I mean, with the imagining, *yes*. But with the whole...me taking myself in hand? No.'

'Haven't you?' Pitch's voice held some sort of rich approval that slid down the back of Jack's spine and made him feel like maybe he'd done the best thing ever.

'No,' Jack whispered.

Pitch bit his bottom lip and looked at Jack like he was some kind of food that he wanted to devour. Jack felt his cheeks flush cold, and he concertedly looked past Pitch's shoulder, because he wasn't used to these conversations, no matter how easy Pitch seemed with them.

'Kostroma,' Pitch said, decisively. He turned to pick up his sword, and Jack hurriedly adjusted his pants and then the next thing he knew, he was being grabbed by the arm, pulled in tight, and they

were hurtling through the darkness.

*

‘Are you sure it’s going to work?’ Jack said, as Pitch placed the small rock by the front door. ‘You sure Gwyn didn’t just give you a piece of coal?’

‘I’m sure,’ Pitch said.

Jack shifted nervously, looking around. Why was it so much easier at North’s Workshop? Why was the flirting and the...everything, easier? Jack realised that almost everything they’d done so far hadn’t actually happened in this house. It had happened at North’s Workshop, or – Jack mentally groaned – that time they were meant to be concentrating while spying on the Nain Rouge.

But something about being here, at Pitch’s house, the house where he kept the locket with his daughter’s likeness hidden for all of those years, where he had gathered together lost signs of himself in rugs and etchings and paintings, made Jack uncomfortable. Everything became less of a game, and he started to feel like maybe he couldn’t do this. That, maybe, Pitch wanted him to be something that he wasn’t. Jack wasn’t big on commitment.

North could say that Pitch loved Jack as much as he liked, as loudly or as firmly as he liked, but Jack didn’t see any reason to believe that this wasn’t temporary. He just hoped it would end later, rather than sooner.

Pitch turned, after positioning the rock, and frowned. Jack thought that Pitch was going to say something, going to ask about the fear, but he didn’t.

‘Will you wait upstairs for me? There’s a couple of rituals that Gwyn taught me to help reinforce the ward.’

Once upstairs, Jack hiccupped on a nervous laugh, and then ran a hand through his hair. He’d always known that the bed was huge, but it was *huge*. It dominated the room.

‘Right, it’s only been a few decades, what’s a few decades, right? That’s almost no time at all. That’s...’ Jack clamped his lips together, because he was pretty sure he didn’t want Pitch to walk in and find him indulging his old habit of talking to himself.

He *wanted* this, it had been about the only thing he’d been thinking about since Pitch had cheerfully misinterpreted ‘take more breaks’ as ‘operation: seduce Jack.’ He walked uncertainly over to the bed and placed a hand on it. The fabric was cool and clean, the whole house seemed to be under a constant spell that repelled dust and kept everything in its proper place. He leaned his head against the heavy wood of one of the four posters. There was an herbaceous oil rubbed into the wood, he couldn’t pick it.

Pitch entered and Jack stepped away from the bed, trying to look like he hadn’t done anything wrong. Except he *hadn’t* done anything wrong. It wasn’t like he’d pulled a secret prank or anything while Pitch was gone.

‘What do I do, Jack?’ Pitch said, taking off his sword and leaning it against a carved chair. ‘Do we *talk* about it? Or do I just kiss you?’

Pitch undid the catches on his robe, letting it fall to the floor in a single movement. The fabric creased heavily where it fell, a pool of black and silver embroidery. Jack stared at it, heart hammering somewhere up near his throat .

He watched Pitch's feet as they walked up to him and then stopped before him. Jack refused to look up, time stretched between them.

He flinched – only a little – when Pitch's index finger touched the underside of his chin and gently lifted his head. Jack looked into pale, golden eyes that he'd become so familiar with and then shrugged helplessly.

'Hey, at least fear turns you on, right?' he said, on a weak smile.

Pitch smiled slowly, a spark of genuine amusement lighting up his eyes. Jack felt an answering smile spread across his face, and the nervousness trickled out of him slowly, leaving a dangerous anticipation in place, like he was at the top of a rollercoaster, about to go on the craziest ride of his life.

He reached up and grabbed Pitch by the shirt, pulling him down so that he could kiss him, wanting the warmth. As Pitch's mouth opened against his, he let go of his staff, thinking that it would fall naturally against one of the many pieces of furniture in the room, but instead it clattered to the floor.

I can get that later.

'No plans for the rest of the day?' Pitch breathed against his mouth, and Jack shook his head. 'The evening?'

'Nope,' Jack said, the word half-swallowed by Pitch.

'So I have you all to myself?'

Jack's breath shuddered out of him, and he stared up as Pitch leaned back. Pitch tugged on the drawstrings at the top of his sweatshirt, and then traced his fingers down the centre of Jack's chest, a gesture that Pitch seemed to love doing, and one that narrowed all his focus to that warm line of sensation.

'Now,' Pitch said, eyes hooded, 'let's see the best way to go about fucking that frost out of you.'

Jack closed his eyes, because Pitch was talking about wanting the rest of the day and the *night*. Because Jack had no idea what Pitch was even talking about, and it still sent a heavy pulse thudding through him.

A hand wrapped around the drawstrings at the neck of his sweatshirt again and pulled him forward. Jack opened his eyes and realised that Pitch was leading him gently towards the bed.

'You make this look like it's easy,' Jack said, without thinking. Pitch had turned so that Jack's legs were pressing against the edge of the bed, and Pitch was facing him. Two hands came down and pulled up the sweatshirt, and Jack lifted his arms automatically, and then watched as the frost embroidered hoodie dropped beside them both.

'It is easy.' Pitch removed his own undershirt, letting it fall without giving it another glance. Jack was distracted by all that skin in front of him. Right there. No more having to sneak his hands underneath material. He could just...

He lifted his hands and pressed them to Pitch's ribcage, watching the way his chest rose and fell. There were more scars than he thought there'd be. Marks that mostly looked like they'd been made by other weapons – slices and nicks. A long, well-healed scar streaked from the top of his left hip, all the way up to the middle of his ribcage. Jack traced it, eyebrows furrowing.

‘You couldn’t heal yourself?’ he said, feeling the smoother, shinier skin. The scar was paler than the rest of him, paler than his other scars.

‘It was before the golden light, during training. Any injuries inflicted are allowed to heal naturally during that time.’

Pitch held still as Jack spread his fingers and traced the light contours of muscle. Jack was appreciative of the opportunity. Most spirits didn’t like how cold he was, and so this gentle touching of skin was not allowed for very long. Pitch seemed to have no problem with it. So much so, that Jack felt bold and trailed a hand up and rested it just alongside Pitch’s nipple, and then let his frost curl outward, growing in a leaf-like spiral along his skin.

Pitch hissed and Jack jerked back, sure he’d done the wrong thing, but Pitch caught him around the wrist and then placed his hand back where it had been.

‘It doesn’t hurt?’ Jack looked at the frost. It was already starting to melt, and it was pretty like this, on someone else’s skin, following the rise and fall of muscle.

‘It doesn’t hurt.’

Pitch’s hands found the hem of his pants and tugged, indicating he wanted those off as well. Jack shivered, hesitant.

Pitch watched him, waiting, and then seemed to come to a decision. He withdrew his hands and pulled his own pants off, stepping out of them and kicking them in the direction of their other items of clothing.

He was half-hard already, and Jack saw a few more scars – not as many – on his upper thighs. Pitch was completely unselfconscious in his nudity, and it helped, even though Jack was pretty sure that Pitch found it so easy because he had no *reason* to be insecure.

Jack took a deep breath when Pitch’s hands came back to his pants, but this time helped him, swallowing hard when Pitch knelt in front of him and pulled them off completely. Instead of rising up, he stayed kneeling in front of him, and Jack looked down. Even like this, Pitch still looked *tall*. Jack braced his hands on the mattress, trying to gather himself together.

He swallowed when he felt two large, warm hands wrap around his calves, and then ghost up to the backs of his knees, scratching at the sensitive skin there. Pitch watched him the entire time, an intensity in his eyes that made Jack feel like he was at the centre of something huge, that everything else revolved around them.

God, he thought, as fingernails scraped the backs of his knees again. He leaned harder against the bed behind him, and then his eyes closed when fingers moved up the back of his thighs, sparking up lines of sensation that left him feeling feverish.

Jack was sure that Pitch was going to curve his hands around his ass, but instead he took a more solid grip on the back of Jack’s thighs, and then pulled his legs apart. Jack opened his mouth to say something, make a sound, *anything*, when he felt a searing, wet heat close around the head of him. Sound was stolen from his throat, and one of his hands flailed before finding the back of Pitch’s head and settling lightly, not wanting to pull or push.

His eyes flew open for a second, just to make sure, just to check that Pitch really did have a mouth around his cock, and then he couldn’t focus anymore, because the temperature was so hot it was almost painful. Heat flared around him in the form of suction and he whimpered, then shouted

hoarsely when Pitch's fingernails dug into the back of his thighs and liquid heat enveloped the rest of him.

His whole body bowed around Pitch's head, drawn to it. His other hand fisted into the blankets and he bunched them, pulled them closer without thinking. It was one thing to have a warm hand wrapped around him, but this was something else entirely. The inside of Pitch's mouth was like a furnace, and it didn't matter how cold he was, the heat didn't dissipate. His hand in Pitch's hair clenched hard as Pitch started moving his head, and then Jack realised that was probably a bad thing, and he let go entirely, leaving his hand up in the air, fingers splayed.

Pitch removed his mouth and Jack sucked in a breath, and then another.

'Put your hand back,' Pitch said. Jack opened his eyes and stared down, dazed, and Pitch smirked. 'Do it.'

Jack nodded, but he didn't seem to be able to communicate with his arm. A few seconds went by and he was able to settle his fingers back down in Pitch's coarse hair again.

'Does it hurt?' Pitch said, and Jack blinked to hear the question mirrored back to him. The one that was so similar to what he'd asked when he'd made the frost on Pitch's skin.

'Almost,' Jack whispered. Almost. The strangest memory washed over him. Coming in from the snow and easing into a hot bath, that moment where skin hadn't yet registered the heat as pleasure, where it is shock and a stinging, nettling pain.

'I can work with almost,' Pitch said, and Jack's fingers clenched pre-emptively, as Pitch moved forwards again.

The moment when the heat of Pitch's mouth switched from almost painful, to a drugging, compelling warmth that seemed to curl up through his hips and into his belly was the moment that Jack realised he was going to come. He didn't even have enough time to give a warning. One moment he was gasping brokenly, and the next his back arched and a thin noise vibrated through him. He felt like he was melting and combusting at the same time. He was aware of Pitch's hands stroking the inside of his thighs, of Pitch's mouth, which hadn't moved, swallowing him down like it was what he had intended all along.

When Jack came back to himself, Pitch was already moving up. He kissed Jack hungrily, and Jack blinked when he realised that he could taste himself, that the trace of cold in Pitch's mouth was from him. He didn't even have enough space left in his brain to think anything other than he liked it.

Pitch pulled Jack up onto the bed, and then continued to kiss him, bracketing his arms by the side of his face and turning his mouth into warmth.

'What about you?' Jack said, and Pitch laughed as he reached over Jack and opened one of the drawers in a chest by his bed.

'What about me?'

A vial of clear, viscous liquid was dropped by the side of Jack's head, and Jack stared at it.

'Oh, huh. Okay. Sure.'

'Sure?' Pitch repeated, amused, licking a warm stripe from the inside of Jack's elbow up to his shoulder.

‘Yeah, of course, I just wish that you know, it would’ve been...’ Jack looked up at the exposed timber beams of the ceiling, embarrassed.

‘What?’ Pitch said, and then Jack shivered when he felt the points of Pitch’s teeth around his wrist.

‘I just wish that I could’ve – not that I’m complaining – that I could’ve come while you were...you know.’

‘Inside you?’ Pitch moved up again, and sealed his mouth over the scar at Jack’s throat. Jack couldn’t tell if he liked it or not. The nerve-endings weren’t the same around the scar. Some points were numb and damaged, others were over-sensitive, sparking strangeness through him. And just as he was about to say something, to ask him to stop, Pitch moved and licked the curve of Jack’s ear instead. Jack’s body went limp again, tension rolling out of him.

‘Yeah, I guess I wanted that too?’

Pitch laughed quietly into Jack’s ear, and Jack frowned.

‘What?’

‘That’s the plan, Jack.’ He raised himself up and looked into Jack’s face, amused.

Jack blinked, and then flushed, averting his gaze. Pitch laughed again, as though Jack’s embarrassment was charming.

Over the next half hour, Pitch seemed content to touch Jack’s body with a sensuality that left him feeling unexpectedly cherished. It wasn’t that other people hadn’t taken care of him, it was just that no one had ever paid any attention to him like this. Not while he was alive. And not since he’d become Jack Frost, either. Pitch didn’t even seem intent on arousing Jack.

Pitch dipped his tongue into Jack’s navel, and when Jack giggled unexpectedly, he’d done it again to prolong the sound. He’d sucked several of Jack’s fingers into his mouth, and then made a sound of surprise when Jack accidentally let loose spirals of frost without thinking. Instead of complaining about the cold, Jack had gotten a scrape of teeth over the pads of his fingers, and when a tongue dipped between the space between index and middle finger, Jack hummed deep in the back of his throat.

Pitch pressed two of his own fingers into Jack’s mouth, and Jack sucked with a building hunger, drugged on slow touches. He reached out to touch Pitch, but Pitch caught his arm by the wrist and then pressed it back into the bed. Pitch’s grip turned firm, and the fingers in his mouth stroked down the centre of his tongue. Jack felt himself getting hard again. He didn’t know what he liked about it so much, Pitch holding his wrist down; but he liked it.

‘There are times,’ Pitch murmured, fingers tightening around his wrist, ‘when you are being insufferable, and I indulge myself by dreaming of tying you up, and fucking you until you can’t speak anymore.’

Jack made a sound around Pitch’s fingers, and Pitch pressed deeper, almost too deep, so that Jack’s throat closed on a spasm and his hand jerked in Pitch’s grip. Pitch withdrew his fingers soon afterwards, and licked his way into Jack’s mouth, tracing slow patterns with his tongue.

Pitch’s breathing was becoming shallower, more uneven.

‘I’m insufferable all the time,’ Jack whispered.

'Then you can imagine how often I think about it,' Pitch said, palming Jack's ribs and hipbone with his free hand.

Pitch let go of Jack's wrist, and Jack left it there, slightly above his head, unable to decide why he liked the idea of being tied up so much, and then deciding that it didn't really matter.

Jack tensed when he heard the cap being popped off the vial, and Pitch sighed next to him.

'What?' Jack said, because he'd learned by now that Pitch's sighs were their own kind of dialogue.

'That *fear*,' he ground the word out, though his voice was soft, 'does not sit easy with me.'

'I'm not afraid,' Jack said, as he watched Pitch coat his fingers liberally with the viscous fluid.

'Reassuring me? Or yourself?' Pitch watched him for an answer, but when none was forthcoming, he moved over Jack's body, kissing him slowly. The kisses were soft and sweet, lips caressing his, a tongue that coaxed Jack's into movement. Pitch settled between his legs and bowed his back to stay level with Jack's face.

After a few minutes, Jack had become so caught up in the kisses that he had forgotten all about the lube, all about his fear. It didn't return until he felt Pitch's hand caress along the inside of one thigh, and then dip down, confidently, behind his balls, fingers lube slick and warm. But Jack was able to push his fear aside, and he hooked both of his arms around Pitch's back, absently scrawling frost over the skin he found there, swallowing Pitch's hiss and breathing particles of frost into his mouth.

Pitch pulled his mouth aside and Jack mumbled an apology without thinking. The frost was absent and instinctive, and the more lost in sensation he became, the more it just drifted out of him.

'You taste like *winter*,' Pitch said, and Jack moaned at the raw, ragged voice he heard. Pitch drifted back and kissed the corner of his mouth. 'Like pine and the new growth on fir trees and permafrost deep beneath the snow.'

'You make a habit of...tasting those things?' Jack said, concentrating hard to form a full sentence. The fingers between his legs were very distracting. Pitch was so close, and yet not *in*, and he was waiting on some precipice, wanting while his heart spread its beat all the way through his body. He could feel it in his fingertips and toes.

Pitch kissed Jack again, thoroughly and with attention to detail, until Jack lifted his hips, until he didn't care about anything anymore, except that Pitch was outside of him, and not inside of him, and that was a terrible thing.

'Come *on*, Pitch,' Jack said, then gasped when a finger breached him, slipping up to the first knuckle, hot and insistent. He was surprised, for a moment, that it didn't hurt as much as he'd thought it would, but Pitch had been moving his fingers back and forth at his entrance for some time, relaxing him, drawing forth a bone deep need inside of him.

Jack pushed his hips up, insistent, and Pitch obliged, pushing deeper. Jack gasped at the heat of it, at the fact that Pitch's finger wasn't cooling down, wasn't turning lukewarm. And when Pitch started to move his finger, gentle but firm, Jack realised he was melting. He was melting. There was no way he could hold together through the friction, the heat.

'Warm,' Jack said, unthinking, and Pitch scraped his teeth down the side of Jack's neck.

'Isn't everyone else warm by comparison?'

‘Most – *god* – most people cool down and, *fuck*-’

Pitch was already adding a second finger, and Jack could feel the stretch of it now, a slight burn. He was suddenly grateful that he’d come earlier, because if he hadn’t, there was no way he’d be able to last through this. Warmth was spreading inside of him, curling and hooking into his ribs, into his spine. His core body temperature began to rise.

Pitch fingered him leisurely, in no rush. It was everything that Jack hadn’t experienced before, and his mind was washed of all thought. It was amazing how much it didn’t *hurt*, no matter how deeply Pitch thrust, and it was delicious. And when Pitch began deliberately stretching him, Jack said something inarticulate and dragged his fingernails through the frost patterns he’d accidentally scrawled into Pitch’s back. Pitch said something in response, but Jack was past hearing him.

When Pitch deliberately stroked the pads of his fingers over Jack’s prostate, Jack’s voice broke and he arched. He felt like his whole body was made of nerve endings, and Pitch owned all of them.

Jack was hard and aching when Pitch withdrew his fingers, leaving him empty and impatient, hooking a leg around the back of Pitch’s legs, trying to pull him forward. But Pitch shifted and Jack followed, clumsily, as Pitch pulled them both into a kneeling position. Jack blinked, confused, as he straddled Pitch’s thighs, clinging to his shoulders. They were facing each other, and Jack looped both of his arms around Pitch’s neck when he realised that he was finding it difficult to stay upright. The warmth made him feel weak.

‘I want you close,’ Pitch purred, ‘And I want you to have control over this part.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, against Pitch’s skin. ‘I like close,’ he added.

Pitch smiled against Jack’s shoulder.

Jack canted his hips, rose up on his knees and then pressed his lips against Pitch’s, wanting the reassurance. Pitch had one of his hands bracing Jack’s hip, and the other positioning himself, and Jack felt small pulses of fear, like flashes of lightning seen from a great distance.

Jack lowered himself down slowly, legs trembling, forehead furrowed in concentration and his mouth slack. His breathing hitched when he felt Pitch against him, and the hand Pitch had on his hip tightened. Jack’s fingers were rhythmically scraping through the thin layer of sweat on Pitch’s back.

At the first stretch, he gasped and repositioned himself, holding on tighter, pushing his head into the warm space between Pitch’s neck and shoulder. Even though he had been well-prepared, there was still a burn, and it had been a long time, and there was no getting around the fact that Pitch was not as small as the last few spirits he’d been with.

Pitch reached around with the hand that wasn’t bracing Jack’s hip, and wrapped fingers around Jack’s cock in a firm, distracting grip.

‘*Fuck*,’ Jack whispered against skin.

His legs were trembling too much, he wasn’t going to be able to keep himself in such a tense position for much longer. Biting his lip, he lowered himself more, squeezing his eyes shut and making choked off sounds in time with Pitch’s hand, overwhelmed. He ached all over, from the fullness of it, from knowing that Pitch wasn’t all the way in, from the fact that they were so close, like this, that Jack could hardly imagine a time when he hadn’t had Pitch’s skin pressed against him.

He sank lower and lower, keeping up the slow pace, and then he stopped, full and gasping wetly.

‘There?’ Pitch said, softly, and Jack nodded. He wondered if Pitch was disappointed that he hadn’t sunk all the way down. He didn’t sound disappointed. His voice was strained, his chest moving with uneven breaths; deep and then shallow.

The hand on his hip encouraged him up, and Jack went with it, appreciating the guidance. His mind was blanking out again. There was so much heat inside of him. Pitch helped Jack into a steady rhythm, slow but deep, his hand still moving over his cock, thumb twisting at the head, and Jack’s mind started to spiral away into sensation. There was nothing but Pitch.

Three hundred years of one night stands and loneliness couldn’t prepare him for this. He was lost in it. He was burning up, turning into vapour, and he cried out, hoarse, driving himself into a faster rhythm, biting Pitch’s neck hard and tasting salt-sweat and something metallic under his tongue and wanting more.

Pitch groaned, the hand on his hip tightened, and when Jack drove himself down, Pitch thrust up and Jack was suddenly more full than he’d ever been in his life and caught somewhere between pain and a rippling bolt of pleasure that lanced up and down his spine and Pitch was saying something, *apologising*.

‘Don’t you dare,’ Jack gasped, amazed that he had any language left, ‘fuck, I’m-’

‘Burning up,’ Pitch finished for him, voice rasping as he ducked his head and found Jack’s mouth, pushing his tongue in deep. Jack cried out, close and incoherent and licking hungrily at the taste of Pitch in his mouth. There was a relentless pressure inside of him, ricocheting off his pulse points, causing white sparks to shoot off behind his eyelids.

Unlike the first time, this built inside of him, rising from peak to peak. Every time he thought he was going to tip over, that he was *there*, his body held off and he vibrated with an intensity that was turning him into a lightning rod of sensation. It was almost painful, but he was so *close*. He made a keening sound of frustration in Pitch’s mouth, high and long, pleading for something and having no idea what was left, what he needed.

Pitch broke the kiss and pressed his forehead into Jack’s, hot breath gusting over one side of his face, undulating his hips beneath Jack’s and keeping the rhythm going. Jack didn’t have the concentration to maintain it on his own.

‘I’ve got you,’ Pitch said, low and firm. ‘Jack, I-’

Jack’s mind shattered. His back arched and his mouth opened on a silent scream, digging fingernails deep into Pitch’s shoulders and hearing a reverberating cry near him. Pitch fucked him through his orgasm, wrung cold stripes of fluid out of him with clever fingers until Jack slumped, unresisting and unable to think, shuddering.

Pitch came soon after, one hand on Jack’s hips and the other resting on his upper back, holding him close. Jack moaned happily, tired. He wanted to take the feeling of sex after sex, preserve it in time, so that he could revisit it whenever he wanted. He didn’t want to move, and Pitch didn’t seem in any hurry either. They stayed, arms around each other, until their breathing settled down, until Pitch sighed out a heavy breath against his neck.

Jack wasn’t sure how to disentangle himself afterwards, and his limbs weren’t listening to him anyway. Pitch gently helped him onto his side, wincing in sympathy when Jack grimaced as Pitch slipped out of him. He wasn’t sore, exactly, but it wasn’t comfortable, either.

When Pitch went to get off the bed, a thread of panic wound through Jack and his eyes opened, he reached out without thinking. Pitch came back quickly. He touched fingers to Jack's cheek, worried.

'Shh. It's okay, I was just going to open a window. I can't imagine it's healthy for you to stay this warm for prolonged periods.'

'Warm,' Jack echoed, sleepily. 'You'll come back?'

'I promise,' Pitch said, as though he was answering a completely different question. Jack's eyes drifted shut, and a moment later he heard windows being opened, and a blessedly cool breeze wrapped around his skin. He shivered, and then made a small, muffled sound of surprise.

'I'm cold,' Jack said, as Pitch came and lay beside him on the bed. Jack smiled when fingers ruffled his hair.

'You're always cold.'

'No, m' *cold*.'

Jack listed forwards when the back of Pitch's hand checked the temperature of his forehead. And then Pitch pulled a light blanket over both of them.

Jack was falling asleep. His body shifted until it was pressed alongside Pitch's.

Pitch said something to him just as he was drifting off. He didn't catch the words, had almost no consciousness left, but he picked up the feeling of it, and he fell asleep with a glow around his heart.

*

He awoke slowly, sprawled out on his stomach, face pressed into a sheet. His body ached pleasantly, and he blinked when he realised Pitch was tracing patterns into his back. Fingers moved in spirals and curlicues, and Jack thought of the frost he made on windows. He sighed happily, and the fingers traced an infinity symbol that started at the top of his neck, dipped down to the base of his spine and then crested up again.

'Awake?' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

'Nope.'

Pitch laughed, indulgent.

'I'm a little disappointed with your stamina, but at least some of that can be chalked up to the Nain Rouge, hm?'

'Stamina? Are you serious?' Jack said, indignant. He'd come twice, twice in a day! He didn't know he had that in him.

Jack's eyes flew open when Pitch traced his fingers down to the curve of his ass, dipping curiously.

'Oh my *god*,' Jack said, 'You *are* serious, aren't you?'

'I want you again,' Pitch said. 'You've slept for several hours.'

Jack took in his surroundings. It was night, he could see stars outside. A comforting and cold breeze was tugging on heavy curtains. He shifted his neck and it twinged, and he realised that at some point, Pitch had bitten him hard. He found he didn't mind. He knew he'd done the same thing in return at least once.

'I don't know if I can,' Jack said, quietly. He didn't move, and stayed face down, uncertain. 'This is a lot for me.'

Pitch shifted closer and stroked his hand soothingly up Jack's side.

'I can stop if you want me to.'

Jack thought about it, shifting under Pitch's hand, curious but unsure. He was way past what he knew about his limits, but it wasn't like he'd actually melted and he still liked the feel of Pitch against him. His skin wasn't complaining.

'Don't stop,' Jack murmured. 'I just, don't know...if I can do much.'

'You don't have to do anything,' Pitch reassured him, caressing his back over and over, almost a massage. Jack's eyes closed, and he nodded, because that was nice, because he liked the idea of Pitch wanting him again. No one wanted him again.

Pitch took his time. He stroked Jack's spine and sides like he was a sleepy cat instead of a person. Jack felt boneless and tingly.

Pitch's hand withdrew, and then it came back, slick with lube, trailing a wet spiral down the centre of his spine and then dipping further still. Jack shifted, restless, mouth opening on a soft sound.

The first finger slipped into him easily, and Jack's legs spread, unthinking. He wasn't hard, and he didn't know if he'd get hard, but it still felt amazing. It felt like Pitch was taking care of him, which didn't make any sense at all, did it? Jack swallowed, unused to the sensation.

'You're doing *so* well. You're so good, Jack,' Pitch said, leaning his body over Jack's and pressing his lips against the back of his neck. Jack moaned, a sound that broke in two places. The praise made him shimmer between discomfort and need. Pitch's finger moved in him lazily, following no predetermined rhythm, no set path. At times shallow, and then deep, and Jack's heart rate picked up, he became hyperaware of all the points where Pitch was touching him. A finger inside of him, his torso pressed against the side of him, a leg stretched out over his calf.

'Your body temperature still hasn't returned to normal,' Pitch said against his skin.

Jack nodded, because he could tell. He was much cooler than he'd been when he'd fallen asleep, but the warmth of Pitch's finger inside him wasn't nearly as jarring as it had been. Maybe later on he'd go lie down on the snow and stay there until he found his equilibrium.

Minutes ticked by, and Pitch added a second finger, making Jack more aware of a residual ache. It wasn't bad, just something he observed in the back of his mind. But Pitch still seemed happy to take it slow, to move with no apparent goal in sight. It was as though he wanted to do what he was doing simply because he could, because he wanted to enjoy the feel of Jack. It was alien and strange, and Jack pressed his head into the mattress, shy.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut when Pitch started pressing gentle kisses at the base of his neck, one after the other. There was something about the quality of attention which was painful and he didn't know what it was, or what it was doing to him, but he felt caught in it, buffeted in some internal storm that he didn't understand.

‘It’s okay, Jack,’ Pitch whispered. ‘I’m right here.’

‘People don’t do this,’ Jack said, into fabric, unsure if Pitch would even understand him. His voice was raw.

‘I know,’ Pitch said, and there was something in the heaviness of his voice, that sent a responding twinge through Jack. And all the while, Pitch’s fingers moving inside of him, making him feel exposed, like a nerve with no skin protecting it from the world. He trembled, sensitised.

‘What are you doing?’ Jack wondered where these feelings were coming from. Wondered why *now*. His eyes were growing wet, there was a sting in the corner of them. It was humiliating. He wanted to hide.

‘Wanting you,’ Pitch murmured against his skin. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m confused,’ Jack said, and Pitch paused in the middle of tracing his lips against the bumps of Jack’s spine, exhaled hotly against his skin. Jack shivered.

‘I know. You’re not used to this.’

Jack didn’t know what he meant and he didn’t want to keep talking. He tried to push his fear away, tried to make it so that Pitch couldn’t tell it was there, but it was useless. He wasn’t afraid that Pitch would hurt him, but there was something else, something bigger. People didn’t treat him like this. They didn’t treat him like he was...

Jack cried out when Pitch’s fingertips rolled over his prostate, and shockingly, he felt a responding flare between his legs. He couldn’t believe it, he was getting hard.

‘You look amazing like this, with my fingers inside of you.’ Pitch said, and Jack flushed when he realised that Pitch could *see* what he was doing.

Time passed, and Jack started to feel itchy with restlessness, he wanted more. His hips were moving back into Pitch’s fingers and his hands were clenched into sheets and blankets. He had no idea how long Pitch had been moving inside of him. Long enough that he’d withdrawn only to come back with more lube. Long enough that Jack felt dangerously unstable, like a grenade with the pin pulled out. He was teary, trembling under the weight of each of the kisses that Pitch lay across his back and shoulders, disassembled and unable to put himself back together.

‘Oh god,’ Jack said, pressing himself into the mattress, wanting *something*. ‘Fuck me.’

‘Happy to oblige,’ Pitch said, and moved over Jack, hooking one of his legs up and pressing his knee into his chest. Jack gasped as Pitch pressed against him, pressed *into* him. He was sore, but it didn’t really hurt. It was a constant reminder of how well everything had gone earlier, how well everything was going now.

Jack’s voice choked off in his throat as Pitch pushed deeper, surrounding him, so much taller that in this new position he was able to kiss the shell of Jack’s ear, able to find the side of his forehead and breathe unsteadily against the skin.

Pitch paused and Jack realised that he had remembered how deep Jack had been able to take him before. Jack blinked, surprised, and then pushed up and back tentatively, setting off sparks deep inside of himself. Pitch blew out a breath of shock.

‘Deeper,’ Jack said, and Pitch’s fingers tightened where they were holding his knee up to his chest, tightened so hard that he was sure that – had he been human – he would have bruised.

‘Are you sure?’

Jack nodded, opened his mouth to say yes, and then had the air driven from his lungs as Pitch pressed in deeper. And Jack was about to say he’d changed his mind, that it was *too much*, when Pitch’s hips settled against him heavily, and he realised that there was nothing else left. Pitch was breathing hard, pressing intermittent kisses against his forehead, and Jack could feel his body trembling behind him.

When Pitch started to move, Jack felt like he couldn’t contain the sensations inside of him. He was overwhelmed, and his eyes started leaking tears. It was good, it was too much, and somehow not enough all at the same time. The longer it went on, the more he wanted to escape from the world, the cruel tricks it could play. The more he wished he could have met Pitch before he ever became the Nightmare King. He wished he could have had this for hundreds of years, and not just now, not just while Pitch decided he was into him.

Because that wouldn’t last. This couldn’t last. This was too good. Anything that felt like this wasn’t something that he got to have on a regular basis, it wasn’t *his*, it was just temporary, and-

‘Jack, *no*,’ Pitch cried above him, his movements faltered, and Jack shook his head, because he didn’t want Pitch to stop, but he couldn’t help it. His chest wasn’t big enough for all the feelings inside of him. North had said with so much sincerity, *That man loves you*. But how could it be true? How could something like this last? Nothing lasted. Pitch would-

‘I’m right here. It’s just you and me, I would not wish myself *anywhere* else.’

The words washed over him, and Jack rubbed his tears into the mattress, emotional and hard and turned on and wanting and-

Pitch’s pace went from gentle to intense, and Jack jerked back into a sensate reality. His eyes continued to water, but his mind cleared, no room for any thoughts in the deep, firm thrusts that yanked moan after moan out of his throat and left him shaking to pieces. Then, Pitch went back to slower, rolling thrusts and Jack lifted his head off the sheets and keened. A fire was lit in the base of his spine and he didn’t think he could do it. He didn’t think he could come again. He wasn’t made for this. He didn’t think his body could handle feeling this good, for this long. It was going to break him.

Pitch bit the curve of Jack’s ear.

‘You’re *mine*, Jack.’

Jack nodded, because there didn’t seem to be anything else he could do. And then his spine thrummed, his balls were tightening and he sobbed at the intensity of it, because it was partly pain but it felt amazing and he didn’t know this about himself, he didn’t know he was capable of this, and Pitch seemed like he’d known it all along. Pitch kept moving, thrusting sharply, tremors shaking the lips against his ear.

In the end, when he came, it was so intense that it hurt and felt good at the same time. He produced barely any cool semen at all, but he felt it all the same, between his skin and the mattress. Pitch let go of Jack’s thigh suddenly and pushed in deep, pinning Jack’s wrist to the mattress and holding him down, even though Jack had no interest in going anywhere; couldn’t even move, in fact.

Jack felt Pitch empty inside of him, impossibly warm and turning him to liquid. And then Pitch slumped on top of him, body weight pushing him down into the bed. Jack didn’t even mind. He didn’t want Pitch to leave his body, ever. He could just stay there, and they wouldn’t move, and

Jack would just find a way to get used to the constant feverish warmth.

But eventually Pitch did withdraw, and Jack whimpered. Pitch made hushing sounds, and pressed his whole body lengthways into Jack, wrapped an arm around his torso and pulled him even closer, before tucking his face into Jack's hair and inhaling deeply.

'Mine,' Pitch whispered, possessively.

Jack started to nod, and fell asleep before he could complete the gesture.

Was This Just A Game To You?

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your lovely kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and eeeeeee for delicious comments.

Twilight. Jack still felt feverish and he thought longingly of the snow outside. But given the choice between lying sprawled over Pitch's torso – at some point during their rest, he had ended up on top – and lying in the snow, he would take lying across Pitch's ribs, enjoying the novelty of being able to touch someone else's skin over and over again. And it *was* a novelty. His entire life had involved some kind of 'look but don't touch' rule; not even accounting for all the times he'd just been completely invisible. Now he could touch, he wasn't invisible and Pitch didn't complain.

Pitch hadn't even woken up.

That was when Jack realised how much temperature didn't bother him. Up until then he had worried, just a little, that Pitch was forcing himself to endure the Jack's inherent coldness. His worry drifted away entirely – like dandelion seeds on the wind – to know that Pitch could sleep through it, chest rising and falling, a look of utter contentment on his face.

I could get used to this, Jack thought, shifting and feeling a soreness throughout his body. It wasn't only that he had experienced more sex in the space of an afternoon and evening than he knew was possible. It was also that the extended sense of vulnerability had left him shaken. If Pitch hadn't been willing to offer the same in turn, Jack thought he may have cracked under the weight of it.

I want to get used to this, he thought. The feeling of being looked after, being...special.

Jack's trailing fingers turned into hands squeezing at Pitch, hugging him as his eyes closed. He sighed when a hand reached up and dragged sleep-clumsy through his hair. Pitch repeated the motion a second time with more tenderness as he woke up.

'I haven't ever felt like this before,' Jack said, pushing the whole world away and finding it hard to concentrate on anything else except skin beneath him, fingers in his hair, a residual warmth that spiralled through him and wouldn't let go.

Pitch made a warm, deep rumbling sound in his chest in acknowledgement.

'There's more of your startling openness,' Pitch said, and Jack pressed his forehead into Pitch's sternum.

'No, I mean it though,' Jack said, feeling like if he didn't say it now, maybe he'd never say it. 'No one's ever...really looked after me, like you did last night. Or made me feel like, I don't know, *more*. Ha. I'm not explaining myself well.'

'Aren't you? I understand you perfectly. And I think you more than pulled your weight. I asked a lot of you.'

'Did you?' Jack asked. He had gotten the sense, as the afternoon and evening had progressed, that Pitch had a lot more cards in his playing deck that he was holding back, to make sure that Jack had

stayed as comfortable as possible. But even so, Jack did feel like he'd challenged himself, and been challenged, a lot. He had the sense of being completely wrung out to show for it.

Pitch didn't answer.

'You did,' Jack said, answering his own question quietly. 'I know when other people are together, they probably do...more than I did, or could do. But-'

Pitch shifted beneath him, a hand stroked a line of fire down his arm.

'It never goes away, does it? Not really.'

'What?' Jack said, lifting up and looking into Pitch's eyes. They were half-open, a tiny crease in the skin of his brow. Jack wanted to smooth it away. He lifted up and pressed a kiss to Pitch's lips, chaste and simple, an offering. When he pulled back, the crease had disappeared, though Pitch still looked concerned.

'The fear you carry. Or rather, the fears in their *multitudes*.'

'Ha, well, maybe the Nain Rouge is the reason for-'

'She's not,' Pitch said, softly. 'Exacerbated some, yes. Gave you a fear of *her*, yes. But otherwise, no. I – no, the Nightmare King – was intrigued by you, all that time ago. Fear and defiance. It was-'

Pitch broke off and his eyes narrowed suddenly, he lifted up on one elbow and looked down at Jack.

'What?' Jack said, nervous.

'Is your body temperature still not back to normal?' Pitch said, frowning. He smoothed a hand down Jack's back, curious. And even though it was only perfunctory, a touch that was more clinical concern than seduction, Jack still shivered.

'Is this what usually happens?' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head, thinking back to his previous encounters.

'No, this has never happened before. I thought about going outside, but I liked sleeping next to you. I never get to do things like this. You know.'

'I do know. But we can take this outside. I can lie down just as well in the snow as I can on a bed.'

Jack stared at him in surprise as Pitch slid off the bed and began to pull his clothes back on with a quick efficiency. After Pitch had pulled on his robe, he reached out a hand to Jack and tugged him off the mattress. Jack stumbled a little when his feet hit solid ground, reaching out blindly for one of the bed posts. Pitch made a grumbling sound as he steadied him.

'*What?*' Jack said, defensive. 'Last night was-'

'That's *very* flattering, but I think it's more than that; you were a lot like this immediately after the Nain Rouge attacked you. You're drained. Can you get dressed?'

'Watch me,' Jack said, annoyed at himself, at his physical weakness. It hadn't occurred to him, but he'd been trying to make the frost lightning more often and in more intensive bursts over about a week, and all the physical activity had probably added up.

When he was dressed, Jack walked straight to the window and sailed down to the snow below the

balcony, lit blue-grey in the twilight. He landed rockily, jarring himself a little, and actually felt a jolt of cold move through his body as his bare feet touched the snow. Pitch joined him a few seconds later, having teleported through shadows. For all that Pitch claimed it was a rough method of transport, it didn't seem to impact him.

Jack walked a few steps and then simply fell backwards into the snow. It automatically softened and cushioned his fall, and he dug his hands into it, eyes wide at how cold it was. Then he started to laugh quietly. The snow felt *good*. The cold was wonderful.

Pitch joined him, lying on his side and watching Jack with an expression Jack couldn't place. A moment later he'd reached forward and placed a single hand on Jack's chest like he couldn't help it.

'So,' Jack said, after a while, after he started to feel more like himself. 'Is this a thing? Do we have a thing?'

'A *thing*?' Pitch said, face twisting in distaste.

'North seems to think we have a thing.'

'Something tells me that's not how he phrased it. I can only think of one very annoying frost spirit who would reduce *this* to the word 'thing,' and he's lying in front of me.'

'What would you call it then?' Jack said, mulish.

'Ah ah ah,' Pitch said, shaking his head and smiling. 'What did *North* say?'

'Oh god,' Jack said, groaning and throwing his wrist over his eyes. 'You two are the worst. You're like two kids fronting off in a school yard. I see that *all* the time.'

'That's very nicely evasive of you, but can we get back to the subject?'

Jack refused to look at Pitch. He stared up at the lightening sky, at the moon he could see hanging low on the horizon. His chest heaved suddenly. He couldn't say it. *That man loves you*. Pitch would tell him that North had gotten it wrong, Pitch would take one look at him and say, *Well, I don't know where North got that idea from, but he certainly didn't-*

'Damn,' Pitch said quietly, moving closer, 'Okay. No, it's okay. I understand. You don't have to tell me. I didn't think...'

'You didn't think what?' Jack said, looking down at the snow.

'I'll start then, shall I?' Pitch said, as Jack's panic slowly started to recede. 'I have no patience with the human way of doing things, all this prevaricating and dancing around the truth. So. I care about you. I didn't realise that North knew how much, and I certainly did not think he would *tell* you.'

Jack shivered, and it had nothing to do with the snow he was lying on.

'I love you. I am committed to being there for you. I am – no, don't get up, stay on the snow – I am broken, and I suspect that I am not good enough for you, which is *not* insecurity, but cold, hard, unfortunate fact. You don't know what I've done as the Nightmare King, or what sins I have to atone for, and I suspect there may be no such thing as true redemption for me. And before you jump to conclusions – not that I could ever pre-empt *those* – this is not some gesture of pity or empathy or sympathy. I am far too selfish for that, and far too reclusive. I do not like to share my

time with others, as well you know.'

Jack stared at Pitch so hard his eyes started to hurt. All the air had fled from his lungs. Every word had been laid out precisely, intentionally. It was so direct that Jack felt floored by it.

'You're still...scared,' Pitch said slowly, as though he had expected a different outcome.

'Yeah,' Jack said, staring at him.

'I don't understand.'

North was right.

'Wow,' Jack said, starting to breathe again and finding himself hungry for air. Pitch's face was pinched with worry, but as Jack mouthed the word 'wow' again, a smile lit his face.

Then Jack managed to drag his mind over the rest of the conversation and he frowned.

'You think you're not good enough for me? Is that a...are you serious?'

'Jack, I could sit you down and *tell* you of the evil acts I've done – the ones I remember – from start to finish, and it would likely take several centuries to get through the whole sordid-'

'That was the Nightmare King, not you,' Jack said, even as the rest of his mind had turned into a maelstrom of belief, disbelief, excitement, doubt, questions, answers.

'No, Jack, it's not that sim-'

'Not to you,' Jack said, blinking, 'but yeah, actually, it is. You were the Nightmare King and did a ton of bad stuff. And as soon as those shadows went away, you became some warrior who saved my life and apparently falls in love with people and healed North and-'

'I don't fall in love with *people*. That was intended as a singular, not a plural. And I didn't *expect* that either,' Pitch glowered, more uncomfortable than Jack had seen him in a long time. Jack crawled over and pushed Pitch back down into the snow and then straddled his chest and looked at him. He could feel Pitch tense underneath him.

'You really think it was your fault, don't you? *Everything*? Is that some kind of god complex? You know, I've heard of those, and-'

'I thought, of all the things that I just declared, the thing that we would be discussing at this moment is your fear of being *loved*, not *this*,' Pitch ground his teeth towards the end and Jack shrugged.

'What can I say? My priorities have always been all over the place. My fear of being loved isn't going anywhere,' Jack said, and though the words came easily, they struck an empty space inside of him, a deep terror. He forced his attention away from it and back towards what Pitch had said to him. It was *important*. 'But it's not every day that you actually mention your stuff. And since you started it this time, I just... do you really think that everything you did as the Nightmare King is yours? That it's all your responsibility?'

Pitch's lips thinned and he stared hard at Jack. Jack shook his head in slow disbelief.

'Those shadows? The Nightmare Men? The Fearlings? Some of those shadows are *sentient*, they are more than able to take responsibility for themselves, if they ever gave a shit,' Jack said, and a

muscle slid in Pitch's jaw.

'Who do you think made most of those Nightmare Men? Those Fearlings?' Pitch hissed, voice slipping into dangerous registers. Jack raised his eyebrows.

'Yeah, I'm sure you made some of them, while you were a *puppet*. But you know, you also told me that plenty of soldiers made *themselves* into Nightmare Men, because they were driven mad by trying to fix the holes in their souls. They didn't all become Generals who managed to put the shadows in a prison. They didn't all become the single person capable of-'

'Get off me,' Pitch said, sliding his elbows underneath himself to push Jack off. Jack pushed back, pressed his hands on either side of Pitch's face and stared at him. Pitch was partly right. He *was* broken. But he was so, *so* wrong, too. This was what he had been looking for when Pitch had been working himself to exhaustion. This was what lurked in the background all the time.

'I think,' Jack said, hating himself and having to close his eyes, 'You know what I think? I think that you feel guilty for *everything* that the Nightmare King did, because you can't stand feeling guilty for the one really understandable mistake that Kozmotis Pitchiner made, when he was at the end of his tether, and had nothing left to give.'

Pitch went still underneath him. Even his chest didn't move. He was holding his breath. Jack opened his eyes to see Pitch staring up at him, blank, as though he had been struck and couldn't quite believe it. Jack's heart ached and he lowered himself to Pitch's body instead, pressing his hands to the side of Pitch's head and holding it, wishing he could hold in whatever tumult was spinning around inside of that mind.

'You make that golden light every day with Gwyn,' Jack whispered, 'and they all think it's pretty and wonderful and 'how nice that Pitch can do that,' and you must *hate* it.'

Pitch's chest jerked once, and then he was breathing shallowly, his hands clenched in the snow. Jack wished he was taller than Pitch, wished he could hold him properly. He rubbed his thumbs over Pitch's cheeks.

'You must think I don't see you. And I don't, properly. I can't read your fears like you can read mine. And hell, if it's easier – *easier* – for you to feel bad for everything the Nightmare King did, everything those shadows made you do, instead of... instead of that one moment when you were alone and no one else could stand with you against those-'

Pitch's arm twitched, and then he brought it up over his face. He hid his eyes and Jack's heart hurt.

'If that's what you need to do, then that's cool,' Jack finished, ignoring how his voice was getting thicker, ignoring his own tears. 'I'm down with that. But we should get one thing straight. I chose you. And you're good enough for me. You don't even know what you've given me. You've-'

'No,' Pitch said suddenly, moving his hand away from wet eyes and glaring at Jack. 'No. You don't even *know* what people are supposed to give each other. You have not the slightest inkling of what intimacy is. One hour of tenderness and I was feeling fears and seeing levels of *distress* from you Jack that...' Pitch's chest heaved with anger, and Jack winced, thinking maybe he'd crossed a line somehow. 'Three hundred years and no one has treated you with *basic* care and attention? People need touch, Jack. They need-'

'This isn't about me,' Jack said, closing his eyes and wanting everything to go back to how it was, when he was only just awake and everything was peaceful and easier and the real world was so far away.

‘This part – I am sorry to say – is about you. The part where you believe that what I gave you is some special gift that you don’t *deserve*, because no one ever showed you that everyone has a basic right to expect closeness and intimacy.’

Jack started to slide off Pitch’s body, and Pitch caught him by the arms and held him firm.

‘You’re so afraid to lose me – in part – because you don’t *believe* that anyone else, ever, will treat you with the same basic-’

‘There’s nothing basic about it!’ Jack cried, voice splitting through the quiet morning and startling the birds out of their morning chorus. ‘You treat me like I’m special, that’s not basic, it’s not-’

‘It’s a *crime* that no one else has treated you like that before.’

Jack trembled, and then went limp in Pitch’s grip. He stared up at the Man in the Moon, resentful, hurting. When one of Pitch’s hands cupped the back of his neck, he thought he might cry. But the tears wouldn’t come, and he absently stroked the side of Pitch’s cheek, feeling how angular it was in the way it rose and fell under his fingers.

‘We’re a mess,’ Jack said, laughing.

‘And according to you, we have a thing,’ Jack could hear the smile in his voice, and sighed.

‘Well, I wasn’t sure about that. Actually. But now I think we do have a thing.’

‘A *thing*.’

‘What is your problem with that word?’ Jack said, and Pitch laughed beneath him. It was a genuine laugh, the kind that Jack had always wanted to hear. He looked at Pitch, who was already looking back at him with a gleam in his golden eyes, a smile that was wide and changed everything about his face.

‘I’m only teasing,’ Pitch said, and Jack grinned back.

‘Good, then you won’t mind if I keep calling it a ‘thing’, will you?’

Pitch growled at him, actually growled, and then Jack found himself tossed off Pitch, into the snow, and Pitch poked him in the arm.

‘You can stay there.’

Jack chuckled, pushing his hands and then forearms into the snow. It bunched up under the sleeves of his sweatshirt, it didn’t even feel strange anymore. His temperature was returning to normal. He had more energy available. It felt wonderful. He tilted his head back and got an eyeful of moon drifting even closer to the horizon.

‘What kind of things does the Man in the Moon say to you?’ Jack said, curious.

Pitch sat up and looked at the moon and sighed.

‘Throughout my time as Nightmare King, nothing at all. And then, a little while after the shadows had been taken, I started to feel an awareness of him again. A curiosity perhaps, an interest that stretched down towards me from the Tsar Lunanoff himself. He has – since I’ve been on this lonely planet – only said one thing to me. It was strange, and I am still unsure how to interpret it. It was not long before I met you again, with your Nightmare, Mora. I felt the weight of his attention,

and then I heard – clear as a gong – the words, ‘It’s time.’ Time for what? I don’t know.’

Jack felt his whole body spasm.

It’s time.

Something popped in his mind. A viscous, creeping tar oozed through him, turning his body to stone.

It’s time.

All that time ago, that’s what the moon had said to *him*, and then he’d been shown the picture of Jamie’s face. And then Jamie had *died* and – *no* – and then Mora had taken him to Pitch – *NO* – and then he and Pitch had – *NO!* – and Jamie had *died*, and Jack was standing and off the ground and lightning strikes of fear were hammering through him and Pitch scrambled clumsily upright, saying things – concerned things and worried things and Jack didn’t hear a single one of them, staring up at the Man in the Moon in horror.

The Man in the Moon would have known that Pitch was all alone down there in the dark, and what better way to pull him out of it than to send a broken Guardian all the way-

And what better way to break a Guardian than to kill his very first believer who-

Because adults didn’t matter to *him*. He only cared about *children*.

‘JACK!’ Pitch shouted, and Jack whirled to face him, lungs scored from the force of his breaths. ‘I can’t- I can’t *concentrate*.’

‘Was this a game?’ Jack whispered out loud, hating how true it sounded, how it rung through him. He stared up at the Man in the Moon, mouth dry, everything split apart inside of his head. ‘Was this just...’

Pitch pressed a fist to his head, another to his chest, then bowed over. Jack realised – dimly – that it was his fear doing that. The fear was too strong. Which was strange, because he hardly felt it at all. He felt numb. Every betrayal he’d ever experienced felt like a small, flimsy thing compared to what he felt now. And what he felt now was...too big for his body, so big that he was forced beyond of it. He floated outside of himself, aware of it, not touching it.

‘Was this your plan?’ Jack said under his breath, turning and staring up at the Man in the Moon, feeling something twine up alongside the thick, choking horror inside of him. Something very like hate. ‘Was this just a game to you?’

Because the Man in the Moon had a golden warrior he could now redeem, and because the Man in the Moon had never, ever done Jack any favours. Because he had heard ‘It’s time,’ and then seen the picture of Jamie and then he had gone to see Jamie and Jamie-

Perfect Jamie with two daughters and a husband who had saved the world and been Jack’s Guardian and-

The Man in the Moon would have *known* how lonely Jack would have been without him. Lonely enough to visit a once-golden-warrior. Lonely enough to-

‘Was this your plan?’ he said, voice growing stronger with a terrible anger. He lifted his staff in threat. Wind ripped at his clothing, his hair, made his eyes water. Somewhere below him, Pitch was on the ground, but Pitch didn’t matter.

‘Did you *plan* this? Redeeming your warrior and sacrificing Jamie in the process because he was an *adult* and so he didn’t count!?’ It’s *time* for Pitch to be pulled out of the darkness and for Jack, for Jack to be, for-’

Jack’s voice strangled into nothing and he heard Pitch shouting his name, but there was no room inside of him except for the great rent of betrayal. The horrible knowledge that all of a sudden the words ‘It’s time’ made sense, and he wished they didn’t. He wished he could unmake *everything*. Never had his life felt so completely pointless, so much like a *lie*.

Snow was falling, a blizzard. It had come so quickly, clouds had colonised the blue sky in a frenzy, whipping themselves up huge and charcoal coloured, until only a small gap of sky remained. And through that gap, the Man in the Moon watched silently, offering nothing.

Never giving *anything* back.

Jack fled Kostroma. Fled the Man in the Moon and let clouds cover the satellite so he didn’t have to see the moon anymore.

*

Time passed, eventually his eyes ran dry, not that he’d noticed most of the tears. He wasn’t sure where he was going, he was just *escaping*, but he couldn’t escape. The moon would always rise again. He did not want to share the sky with him.

If he thought he would survive the experience, he would have shot up out of the atmosphere and torn the moon open. He would have turned the satellite into a huge ball of ice until he felt vindicated.

Instead, he touched down in a garden. It was a quiet neighbourhood. Kids were at school, many parents were at work. Since the Unseelie Court had been leading occasional violent and gruesome attacks against people, there was a tense, fearful atmosphere. Suburbs were emptier than they used to be. More people hid inside of their homes. The Unseelie Court still had the power to invoke a terrible belief.

Jack fell to his knees, weak, and his hand rested upon an unusually smooth slab of stone.

He looked down:

Jamie Bennett

Beloved father, son, husband and friend.

We believe in you, as you believed in us.

He looked at the house and his face crumpled. Without even thinking, he’d ended up back here. In full view of empty windows and a back garden that had been poorly tended due to the bleaching fatigue of relentless grief. He whined thinly, a sound that faded into nothingness, eaten by his despair.

Wesley – Jamie’s husband – had made a memorial. It was where the old birdbath used to be. Now, a plaque by a small, circular garden bed with a tree planted in the centre. There were wilted remains of flowers, some looked like they had been placed as recently as two weeks ago. One of the daughters had pushed a My Little Pony into the ground, where it smiled innocently, rain-washed, complete with bedraggled mane and tail.

The tree had died. Maybe it was a frail specimen, or – more likely – Wesley had been too consumed with the responsibilities of being a single father, widower and worker to remember to

water it as often as he should. Jack stared at it. Quietly he tilted his staff with a shaking arm until the wood of his staff touched the tree. Ice flowed sluggish, took the dead trunk and branches within its grip and made a shining tree ice sculpture, catching the few glints of sunlight that persisted through the heavy cloud cover that Jack had brought with him.

It wasn't much, and it wouldn't last, but it was all he could offer. Even making that much ice had caused his arm to shake so much that he'd had to release his staff.

'Jack!'

Jack turned, only to see Pitch step out from the shadows behind the garden shed. He had one hand pressed hard to the side of his head. His face was ashen, gaunt; he looked awful.

'What are you doing here?' Jack said, flat.

'What am I-?' Pitch looked around him, and winced when he saw the house, the plaque. 'This isn't *safe*!'

'Screw safe,' Jack said, staring down at the plaque. 'Go back to your warded house in Kostroma, if *safe* is so important to you.'

The Man in the Moon had told them both the *same thing*, and Jamie had died. Jamie had died and then Jack had been so alone, and then Pitch and Jack had-

'*You* are important to me,' Pitch said, cutting through Jack's thoughts as he joined Jack by the plaque after looking around furtively. 'One moment I was talking to you about Tsar Lunanoff and the next moment...' Pitch pressed his other hand to his head, and Jack's attention piqued. A flicker of curiosity fluttered through him.

'What's wrong with you?'

'I have *no* idea. I very much would like to not be able to read your fears anymore.'

'*My* head doesn't hurt,' Jack said, eyes narrowing.

'Excellent,' Pitch's tone implied it was anything but. 'What the *hell* was that earlier?'

'I don't want to talk to you.'

Because what if everything had been some game? Some manoeuvre? It wasn't that he thought Pitch was in on it, but what if the Man in the Moon had manufactured whatever connection they had? What if it was a lie?

'And I don't *understand*!' Pitch said, sounding desperate. 'I wish to understand. That's all. Please.'

Jack rested his forehead on bent knees. The grass was cold underneath him, but it wasn't as cold as snow. He pressed one of his hands into the ground and started to cool the soil underneath him, and then stopped. Whatever frost he had left in the deep well of power inside of him; there wasn't much of it left.

'Manny never talked to me much,' Jack said. 'Ever. A little while ago, he got my attention and he told me, "It's time."'

Both of Pitch's hands dropped from the side of his head. Jack could feel Pitch staring at him, but he didn't bother looking up. He wanted to disappear, not engage.

‘He showed me a picture of Jamie, and I thought... maybe he meant that it was time to visit Jamie, because it had been a while. But I also thought maybe Jamie was in danger. And I don’t know, I didn’t really know what it meant. So I decided to visit Jamie. It was, you know, the first time in a while.’

Jack could see a sliver of the plaque between his knees and closed his eyes.

‘Jamie wasn’t well. He collapsed soon after I arrived. And then he died in the ambulance as I followed it. I felt, I felt him go. It happened so fast and I couldn’t, I didn’t...’ Jack realised he was trembling. He was struck by how numb he still felt, how disconnected from everything he still was. Even the story didn’t feel important. He knew it mattered, he just couldn’t feel that anywhere inside of him.

‘Afterwards I was...lonely. North didn’t understand. Mora was good but things are complicated with her, with the nightmares and stuff. I was depressed, I think. Ha, even before the Nain Rouge I was depressed. I wasn’t in a good way. And so Mora took me to you. And then, it turns out, that the Man in the Moon told you the same thing, probably at the *same time*. And so, what? Maybe Jamie was just some convenient way to make sure you had someone by your side while you became a warrior again. Maybe that’s just the way it is. Nothing would surprise me anymore. The Man in the Moon and I... it’s not like with the others. He didn’t talk to me, like he talked to them. He made me, and then he didn’t answer my questions, didn’t reach out. It was like he...’

‘Abandoned you,’ Pitch finished for him, voice raw.

Jack was hollow. He didn’t even react when Pitch’s hand hovered over his back and then settled between his shoulders.

‘How twisted up you are,’ Pitch said, and then he laughed, though there was no humour in the dry, splintered sound. ‘I need to, I have to correct you on a few points first. May I?’

Jack made a non-committal sound.

‘The Tsar Lunanoff cannot predict when someone will die. Nor can he murder. He can give of his power, but he cannot take someone else’s life away. If it were so easy, he would have squeezed me out of existence a *very* long time ago. And if he could *predict* when someone was going to die? You do not understand; he is compelled to protect the vulnerable. He would move the heavens to warn those in grave peril.’

Jack digested this slowly. His mind heard the words, but he was finding it hard to put everything together. Pitch’s hand twitched on his back, and then he continued.

‘The Tsar Lunanoff is very alone. Orphaned, with only Moon Beams to keep him company. He is also possessed of a unique ability – to give away portions of his immense power to those whom he believes deserves the gift of it. Guardians. Those who could intervene and protect the vulnerable where he could not. A lofty, ambitious goal given that he needs that power himself.

‘But, if you can imagine how you feel with what the Nain Rouge took from you, then imagine how terribly drained, and alone, and...likely mad, the Tsar Lunanoff has become, giving himself away like this. Making the Guardians was – for him – an intensely personal act that had consequences for all on Earth. For me, for the other Guardians, for children everywhere. And then...for you.

‘There was a lull, you see, between your creation and that of the Guardian before you. I had started to suspect – as the Nightmare King – that the Tsar Lunanoff was growing weaker. Why do you think the shadows made their move when they did? Tsar Lunanoff could not simply create an army

of Guardians in response. He was *spent*. And the shadows could replicate, could still grow and perpetuate themselves. Perhaps, if they had waited another hundred years... but luckily for all of us, they grew too impatient and struck when they did.

‘But back to the point at hand. I think Tsar Lunanoff knew before he made you, how weak he had become. I think he knew it, and rather than keep what remained for himself, he decided to give of himself to one last Guardian. One last hoorah, as it were. One last, grand gesture. He found someone worthy, gave them what he had left, and made himself so weak he could not communicate for a *long* time. With *anyone*. So you – the last Guardian, for he cannot make anymore – end up so powerful that you have just absently created a blizzard in Kostroma that will make *anyone* around Galich very sorry to go outside.’

Jack took a deep breath, and Pitch’s hand pressed harder into his back, an acknowledgement.

‘For you are extraordinarily powerful. Toothiana lost some of her followers, and she became gravely ill. Without believers, all the Guardians *bar you* fell apart. Part of that may have been simply that you learned how to become powerful without believers. But, also, part of it is simply that the Tsar Lunanoff funnelled so much in your direction: command of the winds, a light touch with the weather, clouds that respond to your moods, ice and frost and this miraculous lightning that spins – often effortlessly – from your body.’

Pitch sighed.

‘Perhaps the Tsar Lunanoff has been alone for so long that he has forgotten how such loneliness crushes someone. Or perhaps because he has the Moon Beams, he did not think the loneliness would score you so deeply. Either way, he made you powerful, but also excruciatingly alone. Tsar Lunanoff became so powerless that he couldn’t communicate with you, and no one else picked up the slack.

‘I cannot say why we both heard him say the same thing, potentially at the same time. But you are giving him far too much credit. I doubt he could see a future where you and I would become important to one another. Maybe he witnessed the Unseelie Court making a move. Maybe he noticed that Jamie was ill and thought you’d have a better chance of doing something about it; and it was just terrible luck that you were too late. Maybe he wanted me to galvanise myself so that I became willing to leave the labyrinth of shadows Augustus had commanded me to stay within. Maybe it was a farewell, a suggestion that it is time for us to stand on our own, without him. Maybe it was only intended for one of us, and he is now so weak, that he cannot direct his messages clearly. There are a thousand maybes, and none of them involve...what you believe happened.’

Pitch rubbed at the back of his head and then groaned.

‘I’m likely not communicating clearly on account of the fact that your feelings burst through my head like a *cannonball*.’

Jack looked down at the plaque beneath his knees. He was reduced to simple observations. Pitch’s hand was still on his back. Warm. His pants were wet from the morning dew. The clouds overhead swirled with quiet promise. They were full of snow.

‘Will you tell me about him? Jamie Bennett?’ Pitch said, and Jack swallowed.

Something like feeling was coming back to his body. He was close enough to it, to know that it was going to *hurt*. He trembled, and wrapped an arm around his shins, finding himself bombarded with memories. Pain twined through him, made his ribs hurt, and his chest hitched around a sob.

The uncertain hand on his back became warmth around the back of his neck, tugging him sideways. Jack went with it, weakly, and found himself against the side of Pitch's body. He didn't bother uncurling, didn't bother taking his head off his knees. When Pitch's hand smoothed down his arm, Jack blinked slowly.

'I thought it was a trick. That you were a trick.'

'You thought that,' Pitch continued, like it was his story instead of Jack's, 'not only had you been abandoned, and neglected, but as soon as things started to go well, it would reveal itself not only to be untrue, but a game of the lowest order. A game where you and your loved ones were expendable.'

Jack nodded, feeling like he would throw up. His chest heaved once, experimentally, but his mouth stayed closed, and he swallowed around the combination of heaviness and hollowness occupying different spaces inside of him.

'The Tsar Lunanoff would not think to deceive you like this. I am sure of it, Jack. Everything the shadows are, is everything that he is – even weak and wasting and mad – *against*.'

'I'm sorry for doing the cannonball thing to your head,' Jack said, quietly.

'A combination of my being attuned to you, and also not being used to a sense of such profound betrayal. For it is hard, you see, where I come from, to create such huge, over-arching deceit of the kind that would lead to such a betrayal of trust. There is not much room left for deceit in a world where the warriors read fears and citizens know to expect this. The more you try to hide a fear, the bigger it gets, the more we know it is there.'

Pitch straightened out one of his legs, and Jack saw his bare foot in the space between his own bent legs. There was a pale, silvery scar that striped across the back of his foot, and Jack wondered where he'd gotten it from.

'One moment things were going pleasantly,' Pitch continued. 'The next moment everything I had known of the world altered and nothing was real. And, though I knew that was coming from *you*, it shook me. I feel out of sorts. I cannot imagine how you must feel.'

Jack curled into Pitch's body, and pressed his face into Pitch's ribs. The trembling was constant now. He was surprised that Pitch hadn't bundled him up and made him return to Kostroma or North's Workshop. Then he realised that maybe Pitch wanted him to have this time by Jamie's memorial. He'd asked about Jamie. He'd looked pained when he'd seen the plaque.

Jack wasn't made for this, bouncing between feeling like his whole world had been a lie, to feeling like Pitch really did think he was important.

We have a thing, he thought.

'And it was more than that,' Pitch said, hooking an arm underneath Jack's and gathering him up closer. 'You always suspected that the Tsar Lunanoff had betrayed you. Oh, how the Nightmare King saw that, alongside all that loneliness of yours. What happened this morning, what was awoken in you, that was not a new fear. That was a *realisation*.'

'Can you take me to Sandy, if he's not busy?' Jack said, hating how plaintive he sounded. He felt awful, shaking harder. His chest ached. His eyes burned with salt.

'I can see how some good dreams might be necessary,' Pitch said, and Jack breathed out an exhale so heavy it was a sob. But he was exhausted, too, his body didn't have the energy for more than the

shaking and the streams of tears that followed, dampening Pitch's robe.

'You scared me,' Pitch said, voice heavy and thick. 'If it's all the same to you, I'd like to stay here a little longer.'

'I was having such a good morning,' Jack said, smiling thinly, and Pitch's arm tightened around him. 'You must think I'm so weak,' Jack added, and Pitch made a noise of scorn.

'*You?* Who looked ready to take on the Tsar Lunanoff himself? Who confronted a source of deep, relentless terror and, upon realising an injustice may have been done, responded not with acceptance, but with *outrage?* Weak? *Please.* What weakness is there in you, who feels so much fear, and then continues onwards anyway? I think you are very strong. I do not concern myself with the weak.'

Jack turned the words over and frowned at them. They didn't sit easy with him. Strength was not something he typically associated with himself.

'We can't rely on the Man in the Moon anymore, can we?'

'No, that much is clear.'

'What will you do if Gwyn can't make the light?'

'I think he can,' Pitch said. 'That man is possessed of an inherent light. With diligence, I think he could make it the golden light. I think perhaps he is the only one who can, who does not need to sunder something of himself to make room for the light within himself. With persistence, it will come.'

'The Nain Rouge hasn't been on our cases lately as much as I thought she'd be.'

'No,' Pitch said, his voice turning dark. 'Augus must have left her with some terribly effective compulsion. But,' Pitch turned his attention towards Jack, 'why are we talking about this? We shall go see if Sanderson is taking shivering frost spirits. Will you pick up your staff?'

Jack reached out and took it up, and then rolled it onto his body as Pitch picked him up.

Seconds before Pitch took them through the darkness, Jack felt warm lips press against his. It was soft, chaste, a mirror of the kiss that Jack had offered Pitch while they had been lying on the bed together in Kostroma.

'Thank you,' he whispered. Jack's brow furrowed in confusion, and he opened his mouth to ask why, but didn't have a chance. Darkness overtook them both as Pitch teleported.

The Wild Hunt

Chapter Notes

ZOMG three chapters to go. And then the sequel. :D

Thank you *endlessly* for all the kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and luscious, wonderful comments. I have not enough words to describe how much fun this has been, interacting with all of you. It's the only reason this story gets posted so quickly, lol.

Sandy was poking Jack in the forehead. Over and over again. Jack grumped and then pushed at Sandy's hand, but Sandy had always been deceptively strong. The hand withdrew, and then returned to slap him gently on the cheek. Over and over again.

'Sandy, seriously, the best sleep I've had in ages and *you're* interrupting it? Don't you take any pride in your work?'

He opened his eyes and rubbed at them, and then stared.

A swirling mass of black sand hung in midair in front of him. It was enough sand to make up a whole one of Mora's legs, perhaps, which meant that Sandy was making tangible, visible process. He hadn't expected to see so much, so quickly. It whirled in a contained loop, spiralling around itself, each piece black and each piece unmistakeably his friend.

'Mora!' Jack said happily, standing up and grinning at Sandy, who had a self-satisfied – if fatigued – expression on his face. 'I can't believe how much of her you've found! This is awesome!'

His hands hovered around the whirling sand, reluctant to touch or disturb the grains, in case he scattered them.

'Hello there, girl,' he said, 'I miss you.'

The sand, having a life of its own already, swirled around his head briefly, and then shifted back to where it had been, ever-moving. He wished she was there, whole again. His heart ached. He couldn't find it in him to be angry at Sandy anymore, not with everything Sandy was doing to make up for it; but without the anger, he just missed her.

'You've done so much,' Jack said, and couldn't help the sadness that entered his voice.

Sandy nodded and smiled up at how much of her he'd found so far. And then he rose into the air and faced Jack with open arms, and Jack pulled him into a hug. Sandy may have been small, but his hugs were big.

Jack was glad to feel rested. He had passed out when Pitch had taken him through the darkness, and only roused enough to feel himself being settled on a huge cloud of sand. Pitch had said something like, 'Make sure he sleeps well,' and Jack was gone again before the conversation continued. He had no idea how long he'd slept for. As far as he knew, Sandy could have gone on his nightly rounds and Jack would have had no knowledge of it.

‘Oi, you two! Am I interrupting something? Or is this gonna turn into a fluffy group hug?’

Jack stepped back from Sandy and turned, grinning.

‘Bunny! Long time no see! How’ve things been?’

‘Busy! Gathering information, you know. Not all of us can take a kip on a sand-cloud whenever we like.’

‘I dunno, Bunny, it looks like there’s plenty of room,’ Jack said. Sandy nodded vigorously, and then pointed to a Bunnymund-sized space on the cloud itself. Bunny shook his head, rolling his eyes and then looked at Jack, pointing with his ears to the tower entrance.

‘Walk with me?’ he said, and Jack nodded.

He turned back to Sandy and they shared a quick smile. Jack wished he could somehow convey his gratitude, but Bunnymund was waiting for him. There was something in the tilt of Sandy’s head that indicted that he understood, anyway. Sandy was so good at reading the non-verbal messages of others.

Jack followed Bunny through the large entrance leading into the inside of the narrow tower, opening onto a broad spiralling staircase. He realised that he’d never seen the staircase itself, he was so used to flying where he needed to go that stairs were pretty redundant. Even now, he floated slightly above the steps, as Bunny took the stairs on all fours.

On the first landing, Bunny stopped and levelled a serious – even grim – look at Jack.

‘North says that you and Pitch are an item.’

Jack swallowed. *This* was more along the lines of what he had been expecting from all of the Guardians, when they found out. This disapproving attitude. There was a flat disbelief in Bunny’s eyes.

‘I laughed at him,’ Bunnymund continued, ‘flat out laughed. I said, ‘You’re such a galah, North,’ and he swore to me that it was true. Is it true?’

Jack touched down on the landing and his fingers moved up and down his staff quickly. There was nothing else to be done for it, except tell the truth.

‘Yeah, I guess. We have a thing,’ Jack said.

‘A thing,’ Bunny said, his voice still terribly flat.

‘Don’t you start,’ Jack said, remembering Pitch’s dislike of the word. He didn’t want to get into an argument about whether it was okay for him to be in a relationship with Pitch. It wasn’t up to anyone else, he got to decide. He’d seen attributes in Pitch that made him special, amazing. And maybe Bunny had conveniently forgotten that if it wasn’t for Pitch, North would be injured, or even dead.

‘Don’t *start*?’ Bunny said, ears flattening, tone incredulous.

‘Why can’t you just be supportive?’ Jack said, angrily. ‘I thought you were a Guardian of *Hope*. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?’

‘Hope? You’re gonna pull that one on me? Bleedin’ *hope*? Do you know what he *did*?’

Jack ground his teeth together.

‘What the Nightmare King did, Bunnymund. He was possessed, it wasn’t him.’

‘You know what they say, if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, then it’s probably a bloody duck.’

‘He’s not a duck, Bunny. He’s a different person.’

Bunny glowered at him. Jack got the distinct impression that if Bunnymund thought Jack would respond to violence, he’d toss him down the centre of the stairwell. Jack’s fingers tightened on his staff. It wouldn’t be the first time that Bunnymund had thought violence was a valid way of responding to Jack.

Maybe, if North and Sandy didn’t support the relationship, he’d feel like he had to agree or prove something to Bunny. But now he felt like he didn’t owe Bunny anything in this. Bunnymund was always assuming that he couldn’t make good decisions, always assuming that he was just some irresponsible kid. Bunnymund, the one who could see him before the children could, and worked so hard that he never made any time for him. Bunnymund, the one who didn’t like play, or fun, or anything, unless it was on his own terms. ‘Go away, brat,’ was one of the first things Bunnymund had ever said to him.

Sometimes Jack thought of Bunnymund as an older brother. And sometimes he thought of him as that spirit who didn’t want anything to do with him, and took a horribly long time to come around to the idea of him as a Guardian.

‘That *creature* attracts darkness no matter what he looks like or who he says he is. Why do you think he ended up the way he did in the first place?’ Bunny said, and Jack took a deep breath, willed himself to stay calm.

‘All of the golden warriors attract some darkness. The only reason he ended up the way he did, is because he was left to deal with the shadows *alone*.’

‘Oh, so that’s it then?’ Bunnymund said, ears pointing aggressively forwards. ‘Bloody hell, Jack! If you’re that soddin’ desperate for someone else to understand how alone you’ve been, then-’

‘Are you serious?’ Jack said, volume rising. ‘You think I’m so *lonely* that I just reached out and grabbed the nearest-’

‘Isn’t that *exactly* what you did?’

Jack’s mouth went dry, and he felt himself begin to shake with anger. Bunnymund noticed, and his ears drooped, his face fell. He rubbed a paw over his face and shook his head.

‘I just want you to listen to reason,’ Bunny said.

‘Why don’t you talk to North and Sandy about it? If you’re having so many problems with it? They’re both okay with it, you know. You haven’t seen what they’ve seen. Because you haven’t been here. Because there’s almost nothing you can do against the shadows. Unlike Pitch, who is – amongst everything else – actually training the King of the Seelie Fae.’

Bunny scowled at Jack and his paws clenched.

‘You can be as flippant as you like, but nothing – *nothing* – erases the fact that you are bunking with the Nightmare King, who *killed* my people, who *murdered children*, who destroyed planets,

left carnage everywhere he went, sent nightmares to *abuse victims*, tormented the vulnerable, committed genocide, and, I don't know, what more do you need?"

'He's not the Nightmare King!' Jack shouted, and his voice rung out through the tower, amplifying and echoing back to them.

His heart was filled with horror, hearing all of the crimes laid out like that, knowing that they were true. But try as he might, he couldn't connect the Nightmare King to the Pitch Black who had told him that he loved him, who was plagued with a constant, immovable sense of responsibility towards crimes that he often couldn't even remember. Pitch didn't even see the crimes the shadows had committed against *him*, invading him like that, turning him into an evil marionette. He only saw the outcome of what the shadows had done to others.

Bunny stared at him in dismay, and Jack realised how unshakeable Bunny was on the issue. This wasn't something that would be solved in one discussion. Maybe it wasn't something that could ever change. Bunny literally couldn't see past the Nightmare King, which – Jack thought – was ironic, given that Bunny was the first one to recognise Kozmotis Pitchiner, out of all the Guardians.

'I thought,' Jack said, tiredly, 'you were supposed to be about new life, *new beginnings*.'

'He is taking advantage of you,' Bunny said. 'He probably thinks that it's okay to get a bit of alright on the side, while working with us. And you're so-'

'Don't you *dare*,' Jack said, starting to think that if Bunnymund didn't shut up, he was just going to encase him in a block. He seemed to have no idea how offensive he was being. Or, if he did, he seemed to think it was worth it. Jack's chest ached at all of the insults, but the rest of him was furious. For someone who treated Jack like the most immature spirit on the planet, he had a bad habit of lashing out when he was angry.

'At best, that monster will bring you nothing but heartbreak,' Bunnymund said, ignoring Jack. 'And you can bet I'm going to be there to say 'I told you so' when it happens. I...care about you, Jack. I don't want to be left picking up the pieces when this goes wrong.'

'You should trust my judgement in this, Bunny,' Jack said, and Bunny laughed.

'Yeah? That's worked so well in the past for all of us, hasn't it? The *last* thing I should do is trust *your* judgement.'

It hurt, hearing that. It reminded him of a ruined Easter, of how eager he'd been to get his memories back and how the Nightmare King had held that over him. It reminded him that Bunnymund was quick to anger, but – in this case – also slow to forgive. Pitch was not the only one that Bunny was still angry at. Jack realised that Bunnymund didn't only have problems trusting Pitch, he didn't trust Jack either.

Jack looked him over one last time, and decided he was done with the conversation. He jumped down the centre of the stairwell, flying down faster than Bunnymund could follow, wondering what North was up to. Bunny didn't follow, and didn't call after him.

*

The sun was setting. Pitch was lacing up his boots. Jack hung around in the doorway, wondering if anyone ever thought it was weird that his own idea of being battle ready was simply to turn up with his staff. Pitch seemed to have a system. Boots, check the sword was shiny enough (or

whatever he was doing, Jack had no idea about swords), check the scabbard, test the leather strap. It seemed like too much fuss.

‘Does your head still hurt?’ Jack said. Pitch had slept for almost a day solid after he’d dropped Jack off to Sandy’s sand cloud. He’d missed Bunnymund’s visit – thankfully – and had only gotten up because Jack had thrown cinnamon cookies at him, one after the other. He hadn’t woken up happy, no matter how much Jack insisted that because it was cinnamon cookies, he should be pretty happy about it.

‘It’s bearable,’ Pitch said, which meant that it was probably still pretty bad.

‘I don’t know if I should come along on this Hunt thing,’ he said.

‘Not a Hunt ‘thing,’ but *the Wild Hunt*. It’s a great honour that you were invited. That we both were invited.’

‘He’s probably only doing it to get me to train with him. Like some sort of stupid fae version of bribery.’

Pitch paused, and looked up from the gleaming surface of his sword.

‘Is that what you think?’

‘It’s true, isn’t it?’

Pitch shook his head slowly.

‘Gwyn isn’t like that. If he wants you to train, he’ll ask you to train. And if he wants you to come on the Wild Hunt, he wants you to come on the Wild Hunt. And if he implied there was a connection between the two, that wasn’t *bribery*, that was simply him hoping you would reconsider. You might consider trusting him, at least in this.’

‘Yeah, because I should trust anyone who just exudes glamour and charm like that. He gets what he wants all the time, you know that?’

‘Yes, of course he does,’ Pitch said sarcastically, running a well-worn cloth over the sword and polishing it up to a greater sheen. ‘He’s *ecstatic* that he hasn’t yet defeated the Unseelie Court, and is beyond *delighted* that so many of the Seelie fae have been disenfranchised and removed from their homes. He just shimmers with *joy* that this is a battle he cannot simply charge out and deal with on his own. He’s-’

‘I get it,’ Jack said, and Pitch pursed his lips.

‘Do you? Because I could go on.’

‘Maybe I got him wrong,’ Jack said.

Doubt it.

Pitch’s sword zinged neatly into the scabbard, and then he was going over the leather strap carefully, checking buckles and button holes and everything else that Jack could see that Pitch already knew like the back of his hand.

‘North seemed fine with us spending time in Kostroma,’ Jack said, frowning. He’d expected some sort of reaction, but North had only seemed happy to have him back, and had then quickly steered

the conversation towards asking Jack to help him conceive a new range of toys that would make children feel even better than usual. He'd wanted to create something more special than usual, in response to the increase in Unseelie attacks.

'He knew in advance,' Pitch said. 'He's no idiot. He knows what a relationship generally means. And I checked with him first.'

'You...what?'

Pitch looked up and shrugged.

'Just that. I checked with him first.'

'You asked him if it was okay if you could take me to Kostroma and shag me senseless?'

'I didn't phrase it quite like *that*,' Pitch said, the corner of his mouth turning up. It was the closest thing to a smile that Jack had seen since Pitch had woken up.

'And he didn't murder you?'

'You have an exquisite talent for hyperbole, has anyone ever told you that?' Pitch shook his head to himself.

'Well, steer clear of Bunny, because he wants to murder you,' Jack said, and Pitch frowned.

'Pardon?'

'Nothing, just a conversation we had while you were sleeping. It's... he's not gonna come around. You should watch your back around him. I don't think he'd do anything, I just don't think he'd go out of his way to do you any favours either. He can't see past the actions of the Nightmare King.'

'And nor should he have to,' Pitch said, standing up and smoothing out his robes, before shouldering his sword. He shifted the leather strap until it was settled properly. Jack stared at him in confusion.

'Yeah, he should,' Jack said. 'Things are different now.'

'It's very hard on him to see me about, living in North's Workshop, getting along with you, and North, and Sandy, and the Seelie fae. He is in a lot of pain, and he has a right to express that pain. The shadows did terrible things to him and his people. That can't be dismissed.'

Jack frowned. He'd expected Pitch to be as outraged as Jack felt. When Pitch turned to face him after straightening the sheets and blankets on his bed, his mouth was etched in a frown, there were pained lines around his eyes.

'Not everyone is like you, Jack. Some people don't find it so easy to separate the man I am now, from the Nightmare King. I don't find it easy. Bunnymund will either come around in his own time, or he won't, and you can't change that.'

'Yeah, but – you didn't hear him. He said you were just using me for my body, and that I was so desperate, I'd sleep with anyone. And that my judgement sucked.'

Jack now felt like he'd slipped from warning Pitch to something that was more like complaining. He twirled his staff and stared down at his feet, wishing that Pitch would just agree with him already and tell him that Bunnymund shouldn't have said those things.

'I'm not getting in the middle of this,' Pitch said. 'I know you want me to pick a side, Jack, but this is between the both of you.'

'He's never taken me seriously. Not ever. The first time I saw him, like – ages ago – he was just...' Jack couldn't think of how to finish the sentence and Pitch watched him closely. After a minute, Jack shook his head and pushed the memory down. Looking back on his early encounters with Bunnymund only reminded him of all those times when spirits thought he was just a public nuisance, or worse, that he was too silly and irreverent to deserve the powers he'd been given. Bunnymund had managed to cover both categories.

'Maybe one day you should tell him about what it was like for you, Jack. About how his early rejections impacted you.'

'Yeah, so he can make fun of me some more,' Jack said, darkly.

Pitch looked like he was going to say something else, something *reasonable*, but instead he held out his hand. Jack took it, nervous, because people didn't invite him to *anything* and now he was going to some big fae event and he had no idea what to expect and he just hoped it wouldn't be really boring.

And that was his last thought, before Pitch rushed them through the shadows.

*

The energy in the air was electric as they stepped out of the gloaming into a dense forest. There were tiny lamps winking with white and green eldritch lights hung from the trees, and a group of about six or seven other fae milled about. A tall man with ram's horns, a woman with the wings of a white swan, a stout gnome wearing a conical red cap and a wicked glint in his eye. The air was thick with the scent of musk and loam, leaves fresh on the branches and rotting away in the soil. Stars watched them quietly. A man covered in thorns and holding a longbow noticed them, and then the other fae turned around as though he'd given a silent signal they were there.

Jack felt their observation like a living, palpable thing crawling along his skin. If the attention of a single fae had been intense, even Albion and Ondine together, this was like nothing he'd ever experienced. Pitch didn't seem bothered by it, but Jack found himself swallowing like there was something stuck in his throat.

Pitch looked at him over his shoulder.

'Jack?' he said.

'You don't feel it?' Jack said, staring at the other fae and wondering where Gwyn was.

The other fae turned back to each other and resumed their talking. Two chatted in English, the rest spoke a language Jack had never heard before. Once their eyes were no longer on him, he felt more himself, but his skin felt itchy, there was something wild and lurching behind his heart, wanting to leap out of his chest.

Pitch was staring at Jack as though he'd just realised something.

'What?' Jack said, scrubbing at his arm, trying to get rid of the sensation.

'Oh, la, he's sensitive,' the swan maiden said, coming over and spreading her great wings a little. Jack looked up at her swan eyes, then down at the wicked curved daggers strapped around her waist. He looked down and noticed that she had swan's feet. 'I like it when they are sensitive.'

P'raps we should hunt you, little one?'

Jack's hand clenched harder on his staff, and a ridge of frost lightning burst out of it. He hadn't intended to respond to the threat, but he couldn't help it. The eye contact felt like sandpaper, especially with the other fae nearby. The swan maiden laughed, webbed fingers spreading in delight.

'Good, frostling, very good. We shall stick to the White Stag today then, no?' And with that, she turned away and joined the gnome, poking mischievously at the top of his hat before engaging him in conversation.

'Sensitive?' Jack whispered.

'I hadn't thought... it explains why Augustus compels you so easily, why Gwyn's glamour affects you so. It-'

A wild, intrusive howling filled the air. It built as further howls crept towards that single canine voice, a baying of hounds, thrilling along the winds that picked up their pace and whistled through the air. Jack felt something in his blood sing with it, his feet itched to hop on the winds, to tumble and race madly through the forest. The thumping of his heart became a gallop, he felt it like a cold flame growing inside of him.

The other fae weren't immune to it either. Several broke out into sudden laughter. The man covered in thorns took up the howl, and the man with ram's horns stomped the earth with his hooves.

Pitch looked around at everyone, curious, and when he took in Jack, his eyes widened.

'It affects you too?' Pitch said.

'Not you?' Jack said, breathless. 'I just want to...go. Run. I feel like,' Jack shook his head. 'I feel like my blood is humming with it. I can't, I can't...' Jack took a deep breath, and then another.

The howling got closer, and suddenly a pack of hounds streamed into the clearing, barking in excitement, snapping at each other, stopping on occasion to take up the baying howl. They were huge, black, shaggy beasts of dogs, eyes gleaming red or green, lithe with the sighthound build, the deep ribcage, the high arch into back legs ready to spring.

The hounds were followed by galloping vibrating through the moist earth, and horses stormed into the clearing, riderless and saddled.

A cheer went up when Gwyn followed behind them, riding a creamy horse whose hooves weren't even touching the ground. Jack's mouth dropped open when he saw him. He was out of his armour, wearing clothing that looked as though it had been pieced together from animal skins, furs, bark and leaves. It was well-tailored, but in that moment Jack could not ignore how feral and non-human he looked. He had a longbow strapped to the side of the saddle, and a quiver of arrows slung around his back.

The other fae were climbing upon their horses, for – Jack realised – each horse went specifically to a certain fae, and waited patiently for their wight to mount.

When there were only two unmounted horses left, Jack realised they were for he and Pitch.

Pitch mounted easily, leaning forward and rubbing his hand down the neck of his charcoal horse, offering a small smile when the horse swung his head in Pitch's direction and gave him a

questioning look.

Jack looked at the last horse remaining, and frowned.

I can't.

He looked up at Pitch, and then over to Gwyn and the other fae, who were clearly waiting for him. The pressure of their eye-contact made him lose his focus. His hands ached to run over black sand, to wake up on a tree bough and see a Nightmare in the most improbable of places.

Mora.

'I can't,' Jack said. 'She-'

'It's no matter,' Gwyn said, easily, waving a hand in a dismissive gesture. The horse backed off and then cantered away smoothly, disappearing into the forest. 'You can still get airborne. Not all of us can fly. I'm glad you made it, Jack Frost.' He offered Jack a dangerous grin which in other circumstances may have been frightening, but now seemed only playful with promise.

Gwyn surveyed everyone, and then nodded to himself.

'We have dark times upon us. But the Wild Hunt is not about dark times. It's about returning to our roots. Whether you sprung up in battle, were born in a forest, breathed your first breaths underwater, you're all welcome. Some of you are old friends, and some of you are new ones,' Gwyn looked at both Pitch and Jack as he said this. 'Everyone is welcome.'

With that, they all rose into the sky at once, to look down upon the forest that stretched out endlessly in front of them. The contours of the forest were unfamiliar to Jack, and he wondered if it was like North's Workshop, Tooth's kingdom – tucked away in an otherworld, not quite existing in the real world. The hounds were able to dance along the winds, the horses were in high spirits. Jack followed, happier to be riderless, unable to resist smiling when one of the hounds pushed its cold, wet nose into Jack's palm from behind.

There was a wildness growing inside of him. An unfurling tendril, like that of a fern, reaching out up and down his spine, sending hunger through him.

'*There!*' the swan maiden shouted, pointing, wings spreading wide. Her horse spun, and down through a dense stand of trees Jack saw him. A large, white stag, glowing eerily in the forest, calmly looking up at them. His antlers were huge and heavily branched, shining just as brightly as the rest of him.

'The King of the Forest himself, and a good sign,' Gwyn said, pleased. 'Alright, rules are simple. We hunt!'

The stag reared and then turned and bounded away with supernatural speed, disappearing in under a second. The hounds surged forward, the horses followed, and Jack flew with them, feeling the night and the winds all around him, feeling *slow*.

He could find that stag. The winds would show him the scent, and he could track anything. He was faster than the hounds and the horses both. He looked around him, at everyone's excitement. Pitch was riding level with Gwyn; they shared a look at one point, and Gwyn grinned at him with the same fierce camaraderie that Jack had witnessed between them both at the training arena.

Even that didn't bother him. What bothered him was sailing through the wind at the same speed as everyone else. That was not tolerable. Not with the strange excitement that lurched through him,

the wind that tugged at his hood and the drawstrings of his sweater, taunting him, reminding him that he could be so much *faster* than the rest of them.

He sped up and raced alongside Gwyn, and Gwyn turned to him, an animal wildness in his eyes. What Jack saw in those pale blue irises was the same inexpressible feeling that thundered through him.

‘Do I have to hang back with you guys?’

‘You can go faster?’ Gwyn said, eyebrows lifting. Jack looked past him and Pitch nodded in encouragement, and Jack looked back at Gwyn and shrugged.

‘Heaps,’ Jack said. ‘You guys are dragging your heels.’

Gwyn laughed.

‘Young man, you may do whatever you wish. Trust your instincts!’

Jack looked down at the forest beneath them, and then into the night sky. He felt the wind pulling at him, speaking to him in its insistent whispers. He took his staff in a better grip and swung away from the main party, not wanting to disturb them.

‘Come on then, wind, show me what you’ve got!’

The wind gusted up, fierce and strong. It picked him up and he tumbled through it, falling from stream to stream of invisible current, racing along it. Behind him, several of the fae whooped and cheered, and Jack heard himself laugh in response, though he was already so far ahead of them they probably couldn’t hear him. He let himself drop – like a bird of prey – down into the forest before swinging back up to get his bearings. He looked behind him, and he was already far ahead.

Maybe it was the energy of all the fae, maybe it was the excuse to get out and do what he did best, but he was in high spirits. Snow began to fall over the forest. He would duck below the canopy, trusting the winds to find the scent. Then he would rise above it, scattering frost liberally over the treetops, making them blossom in shades of blue and white. He felt more himself than he’d felt in a long time. The excitement that hammered through him was almost like what he’d felt the very first time he’d realised he could make the frost, call the snow, rise and fall on the winds.

His feet brushed logs on the ground and the tops of trees in the sky. There was no dizziness, no vertigo or nausea. If the wind thought he’d do better flying upside down, that’s what he did. If a current of air seemed ripe for the growing of snow, that’s what he made. He was in his element, away from North’s Workshop and even Kostroma, where the snow was already still on the ground and everything was far more static. He preferred motion; the snowflake in the sky, the wind tearing leaves from the branch, ice crawling along a windowpane.

He wished Mora were racing alongside him, alternating between keeping up and falling behind. Towards the end she started to excel at reading the winds, and between them both, they owned whatever section of the sky they occupied, trying to outdo each other for acrobatics.

The scent of the stag was tantalising, rippling thread as he bounced and dashed from wind current to wind current. It reminded him of aged pine needles, the sharp scent of a tree splitting in half during a storm. It had been elusive at first, but he was gaining on it, and the scent thickened in the back of his throat.

The baying of the hounds had fallen further and further behind until they were nothing but distant punctuations, reminding him of how far he’d come. Then, he heard nothing at all but the sounds of

the forest. He felt like the land was his to explore, his for the taking, every tree and boulder there to help him on his journey forth.

He hadn't realised how close he was, until he looked sideways and saw himself drawing even with a huge, galloping stag.

Jack shouted in excitement and swung sideways, wondering what he was going to do once he got there. Gwyn had told him to trust his instincts. The stag knew he was there, as he picked up pace as Jack approached, but Jack was like the wind itself, and speed was rarely a problem. He had stooped and dived with peregrine falcons, he knew how to go *fast*.

The thundering of hooves echoed in his head as he hooked the crook of his staff around the stag's antlers. The stag roared in outrage, but Jack used the impetus to swing himself forward and grab onto one of the antler points with his free hand. Unlike Pitch and the fae, he had no weapons, he had only himself, his staff, and the well of cold and frost inside of him.

So it was a simple matter to slick the forest floor beneath the stag.

The stag roared again, though he kept his footing for a surprising amount of time. But then he slipped and spun sideways, and Jack only just managed to leap up out of the way before the stag slammed hard into the side of a boulder. The boulder cracked with a giant sound that split the air around them, and Jack worried for a second that the impact had killed the stag. It was the point of the hunt, he was sure, but the creature was too beautiful to kill. He'd just wanted to stop it. To catch up.

The stag shuddered, his great, antlered head lowered and he picked his feet up from under him. Jack watched, wary, wondering what happened now. The stag didn't seem to be injured. He found his way off the ice with a level of daintiness that didn't seem to fit a stag so large and well-muscled. When the stag found solid, non-iced ground again, Jack thought he'd sprint off, but instead he faced Jack with black, liquid eyes and blinked once.

Jack felt like he was five years old. There was something *ancient* in that gaze. When the stag turned his head sideways to get a better look, Jack swore that those eyes were wells all the way down to the first forests. He braced himself on his staff, an unusual storm of energy pulsing through him, turning his skin to prickles his blood to fire.

'*Well met,*' the stag said. Jack knew it was the stag even though the creature's mouth never moved, even though he felt only a resonating, wise voice inside of his head.

'Uh, hi?' Jack said. In the distance, he picked up the faintest thread of baying hounds. The rest of the party were gaining on them.

'*You may take my life,*' the stag said, and Jack shook his head, feeling about as significant as an ant protesting to the king of a forest.

'Do you see a weapon? I'm not killing you,' he said.

The stag tilted his head sideways, muscles rippling in his neck, made thick and impressive from years of holding up huge antlers.

'*I am the quarry. We have had a merry chase. You have found me. You must take me. It is your reward. It is the contract of the Hunt.*'

There was something firm and implacable in that voice. Jack could not believe that the stag was practically demanding to be killed, and worse, Jack suddenly *knew*, deep down in his bones, that he

was doing something wrong. But Jack couldn't do it with his bare hands, and he wasn't going to do it with his ice, and he didn't want to kill the magnificent beast. But he didn't want to be standing there, unable to do it, when the rest of the fae arrived.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said. 'I really am. Maybe I misunderstood, but I can't do it. I don't care if you come back over and over again, or if you...*like* being killed, which – weird, but okay. It's important to you. Can I pretend I didn't find you first?'

The stag walked closer to Jack, so close that Jack could lean forwards and touch his forehead to the lower tips of the antlers. The stag looked at Jack with an assessing, calculating stare. Jack realised, with a sudden lurch in his stomach, that he really was staring at the King of the Forest. All breath deserted him. He was made bare by that gaze, though he stood firm and tried to endure it.

'I leapt over you once,' the stag said, 'when you were frozen in the dark. Perhaps now I can leap for you, for a short time.'

The stag carefully folded his front legs, making his back presentable. Jack swallowed when he realised what the stag was asking of him.

'Um. You're like the King of the Forest,' Jack said, voice shaky.

'A ride, or my life. It is your choice. I do not offer these things lightly. You will do me grave offense if you do not accept.'

Don't make the King of the Forest mad, don't make the King of the Forest mad, Jack thought.

The hounds got closer and closer. He was out of his depth as he climbed onto the stag's back. Longer white hair sprouted from the base of the stag's neck, and Jack grabbed onto it with his free hand, holding his staff out to the side.

Jack expected a warning, but he received none as the stag leapt up and suddenly became airborne, crashing up through the upper storeys of the trees and into the night sky. He turned his body and the stag turned with him, responsive and understanding what he wanted almost before he wanted it. The fae were approaching. Jack hoped it wouldn't be the day he got an arrow in the chest. On the back of the stag that the fae were *hunting*, he felt like a target.

But all the concerns and worries weren't big enough to match the writhing energy inside of him. If he didn't move, he was going to lose his mind.

He leaned forward, calling up the winds, and the stag leapt onto them, galloping forwards towards the rest of the fae, antlers down in a charge. Jack thought he'd be shaken off, but instead he was supernaturally settled, as though he had ridden royal, gleaming stags all his life. He removed his other hand from the longer hair at the base of the stag's neck and realised he had both of his hands free to do whatever he wanted. Something about the stag's powers meant that he wouldn't be shaken off. He shifted his legs into a more comfortable stance and shot a flare of frost lightning from his staff, a warning to Pitch and the other fae.

Don't shoot! Frost spirit coming through.

Amongst the baying of the hounds, that cacophony of noise, Jack suddenly heard the cheers and whoops from the other fae. He sped towards them, trailing snow behind him, unable to believe that he was riding a supernatural stag.

The hounds caught up to the stag first, and they swirled around them both, sniffing and barking, and then ran off, happy to leave the stag alone now that he had been caught. Jack caught Pitch's

eye and felt flushed at the approving expression on his face. Gwyn didn't seem at all disappointed that Jack hadn't killed the stag. Jack was surprised to see him so relaxed. He seemed entirely unlike the Gwyn that came to North's Workshop every day and trained grimly for hours on end. He was a wild creature, a piece of starlight fashioned into a forest wight.

'*Well met,*' the stag said to the hunting party, and the other fae cried various salutations back, greeting the King of the Forest in their own way.

'We might as well make the most of this,' Gwyn said. 'How do you fancy slowing down and joining us on a jaunt?'

'Maybe you guys should all learn how to go a little faster,' Jack said, grinning, and the stag bucked underneath him, catching his good humour. Together, they jumped off into the night, Jack laughing as the others followed.

The night became about play, about *fun*. Jack and the stag alternatively hung back – while Jack threw snowballs or sent frost skittering between everyone or teased the dogs with flurries of snow – or they shot off ahead, quickly outpacing and circling the party. Everyone seemed to be in a fine mood.

At one point, he threw some snowballs at Pitch, one after the other, and Pitch looked indignant for a few seconds, before taking both his hands off the reins and shooting a ray of golden light in Jack's direction.

Ignoring the delighted acknowledgement from the other fae, Jack dodged out of the way, tracked the light and then swept his staff up underneath it, infusing it with frost. The light burst apart into reflective pieces of ice, a kernel of golden light in each of the crystals, shimmering down around them. It didn't fall like ice, but spread around them, sparkling like the stars above them.

He turned to Pitch, wanting to point out what they'd made together, but as soon as he and the stag whirled around, there was an even bigger burst of light shooting towards them.

Jack reacted without thinking. He seeded it with snow and frost, letting the cold energy flood out of him. The ray continued upwards in its momentum for another few seconds and then suddenly expanded, turning into a small, fat, snow-laden cumulonimbus. The cloud shifted and glowed from within, and then light-imbued pieces of snow started to fall from it. Slowly at first, and then faster.

Jack flew underneath the cloud, ignoring the exclamations from everyone else, and scooped up some of the snow in his hand. He looked at it closely, turning the snowflakes over with his thumb. He pressed down on a piece of snow and golden light flared out of it briefly, saturating that small part of his hand with warmth, a small drop of confidence. It didn't behave like regular snow. The atmosphere around them was too warm to sustain snow for long, and yet this wasn't melting. All around him, it simply fell and radiated light, turning the world around them into a small, snowy galaxy.

His fist clenched around the snow and the stag was dashing back to Gwyn and Pitch before his thoughts had even formed together in his head.

'We can use this!' Jack said, breathless.

Gwyn was staring up at falling snow, awe and thoughtfulness mixed together on his face. On anyone else, the dumbstruck expression – mouth hanging open, lower lip slack, eyes wide – would have looked stupid. On Gwyn, it simply looked beautiful.

Damn it, that man's glamour will be the death of me.

'Explain,' Pitch said, and Jack pointed up at the falling snow.

'It's not regular snow. It doesn't melt properly. Remember at North's? We made a little bit then, and it didn't behave like normal snow. But – look.' Jack reached out and called some of the snow to him and presented a handful of it to Pitch. Gwyn had come over, and was watching the exchange between the two of them curiously. The rest of the fae had started capturing pieces of snow themselves, and the gnome with the red, conical hat had rubbed some of it into his wrist, releasing the light and then laughing.

'See? If I squash a piece, the light comes out. Which means that all of that snow, *all* of it, holds a tiny piece of that golden light. Except it doesn't just disappear like it does when you make it, because it doesn't *melt* properly. We could use this in the middle of a fight, or a battle against the shadows, and sure, it's not as strong as what you produce, but it's more constant. It would get to them, right?' Jack looked up at Gwyn to check his theory wasn't stupid, 'Right?'

Gwyn was poking the pieces of snow in Pitch's hand, and then he picked up a tiny piece and rubbed it in his fingers.

'It doesn't melt like normal snow,' Gwyn said, and then stared at Jack. 'Do you know what this means?'

'Of course I know what this means!' Jack said, heart thundering. 'It means we have another weapon, right?'

'Is it hard to make?' Gwyn said, and Pitch shook his head, looking at Jack.

'Does it tax you, to do this?'

'Are you serious? Snow isn't like the frost lightning, I hardly have to *think* about it and it just happens. If you wanted a huge *snowstorm* and could get enough of that light into it, we could have this raining down on those shadows for *hours*.'

'It wouldn't kill them,' Pitch said, reaching up and plucking a piece of snow out of the sky. 'But they wouldn't like it. The lesser shadows wouldn't want to cross it. The Nightmare Men and Fearlings could possibly shrug it off, but I daresay it would not feel good.'

'Is this limited to the outdoors?' Gwyn said, and Jack shook his head.

'I can make snow anywhere,' he said.

'Train with us,' Gwyn said, the words exploding out of him. 'Don't you see? This is important, you are important.'

'I don't do training,' Jack said, dismayed, because he hadn't wanted tonight to go in this direction. Because instead of wanting to get under Gwyn's skin and antagonise him, he could see that Gwyn really did mean well.

'Jack,' Pitch said, holding up a hand before Gwyn could argue. 'Would you train with *me*?'

'I don't *like* training,' Jack said, before he'd even had a chance to think about his answer. He looked into Pitch's eyes, that pale gold mirroring the snow that was falling around them, and swallowed.

‘It wouldn’t be like training. It wouldn’t be military drills,’ Pitch said, ‘I know how much you hate them. It would just be...you and I, seeing what happens when we put the golden light and your frost together. Imagine if we can bond the light to the frost lightning, Jack. Aren’t you curious?’

Jack swallowed. He didn’t look at Gwyn, ignored the look of appeal on his face, and focused on Pitch. Could he train with Pitch? He *hated* training. He hated class, homework, lectures, sitting at tables, being invited to meetings, being told that he had to do something for a fixed hour, anything at all approaching formal education.

But he didn’t hate Pitch. He liked spending time with Pitch. Training with Pitch, just the two of them, it would give them more time together.

And he *was* curious.

‘I don’t want it to be like training,’ Jack said, feeling himself cave. Gwyn’s face split into a grin before Pitch had a chance to respond. He clapped Jack on the back with an open hand and then wheeled off to join the rest of the fae, exploring the cloud more closely as it started to dissipate, having unloaded most of the snow it contained.

‘We have a weapon,’ Jack said, stupidly, and Pitch nodded.

‘*We* have a weapon.’

‘It’s a pretty cool-looking weapon,’ Jack said.

‘I agree,’ Pitch said, looking around them at the snow that was falling. ‘Would you like to make some more?’

Jack grinned. He sent out a blast of snow at the same time that Pitch emitted the golden light. He couldn’t tell which of them had gone first.

*

Gwyn had been right, there was a lot of ale.

The King of the Forest had disappeared gracefully back into the woods after about two hours, leaving Jack to fly back with the rest of them. The entrance where Jack and Pitch had first met the other fae was now filled with wooden tables covered in platters of food, barrels of ale nearby. The fae were enjoying tankards of ale, richly flavoured. The platters of food ranged from the mundane (sandwiches), to items that Jack was surprised to see there (twitching scorpions). The gnome had made short work of the scorpions, and picked worms from a platter that the swan maiden clearly wanted for herself.

Pitch had joined Gwyn, sharing drinks and war stories. At least, that’s what Jack assumed they were speaking of, Jack had no idea what they talked about. He observed quietly from a distance, sitting on a log by the pack of sleeping, exhausted sighthounds, holding a frozen pint of ale because he didn’t like the taste of alcohol and turning it to ice seemed to be the only useful thing to do with it.

Gwyn and Pitch talked easily with each other. Pitch’s face wasn’t exactly animated, but he saw that Pitch was invested in whatever he was talking about. Gwyn nodded and shook his head and smiled and frowned at all the right moments, and together they looked like they somehow balanced each other out. Pitch understood fear, teleported through shadows; even though he was not the Nightmare King, there was still a darkness about him. And Gwyn was imbued with that strange, charismatic light. Jack thought they’d make a good looking couple. He thought that if it wasn’t for

him, maybe one of them would have made a move already.

He was tired. He was still filled with that uneasy, unsettled energy that the swan maiden had later described to him as ‘a sensitivity to dra’ocht.’ Milling about with them as they drank had left him uncomfortable. After having created so much snow and ice, leaving the skies practically glowing with ice crystals, he still didn’t find their jarring energy any easier to deal with. He thought he understood Gwyn a bit more, now, but that made the knowledge that he and Pitch got along so well even harder to deal with. Gwyn wasn’t just some grim workhorse. He wasn’t playful, exactly, but he was well-meaning, generous, clearly more in his element amongst other feral creatures and in a forest; than in formal armour around a table. Pitch deserved a friend like that.

Pitch walked over and joined Jack on the log he was sitting on. He looked over to Jack’s tankard of frozen ale and breathed out a laugh.

‘Did you have a good time?’ he asked, and Jack nodded. His eyes followed Gwyn, who was now chatting with the fae who had ram’s horns. Jack realised he hadn’t learned any of their names.

‘You look tired,’ Pitch said, and there was a gentle empathy in his voice which made Jack frown and stare down at his drink.

‘I had a good time,’ Jack said. It had been a great time, one of the best experiences he’d had in a long time. He had felt almost effervescent at one point, speeding through the forest, becoming one with his environment. The Wild Hunt had filled him with an artificial energy, and now that it was gone, it highlighted the gap in his soul.

‘I’ve never seen you like that before,’ Pitch said, and Jack looked at him. Pitch was looking down at one of the hounds. He reached out and scratched its neck affectionately. A tail slowly slapped the ground, and then stilled as the dog sunk more deeply into sleep.

‘Like what?’

‘Truly in your element. Away from the suburbs and Kostroma and the Workshop, tumbling through the air like that. For the briefest of moments, I envied you, Jack.’

‘*Me?*’ Jack said, putting down the tankard and wishing Pitch would look at him.

‘I’ve never really belonged here. I was never intended to be a part of this planet, and though I have adapted, it’s not the same. I cannot read my immediate environment as well as you can. Even the light I make is not innate to this world. Gwyn is *made* of light, and yet he struggles to make the golden light.

‘It’s why the shadows are so powerful here. Because they do not belong here either. Before the Unseelie fae took possession of the shadows, there existed a kind of mutual balance between the Unseelie and Seelie fae. Did you know that Augus used to run the Wild Hunt? He would share the skies with Gwyn. They would put their differences aside for an evening and pick up their quarrels the morning after. The Seelie fae and Unseelie fae used to be the perfect example of a world not so black and white.’

Jack swallowed, trying to imagine a world where Gwyn and Augus hunted side by side. He couldn’t do it.

‘The shadows changed everything. It unbalanced the natural order of things. For as long as I am here, I – and the shadows I brought with me – will always leave this world off kilter. Perhaps it is fair then, that I cannot incorporate myself into my environment as easily as you can. Watching

you... it made me realise that you do have a place here. You may not feel that as a reality, but anyone watching you knows it to be true. You belong.'

Jack was breathing shallowly, nervously. He scooted closer to Pitch until their sides were touching. Pitch still hadn't looked up, was staring at the hounds as though they were fascinating.

If he was braver, he'd tell Pitch that he belonged, because he belonged with Jack. But he wasn't that brave. He didn't even know if he believed it himself. He had wanted to hear confirmation that Pitch loved him, but once he'd heard it, he hadn't been able to think about it again too much. It filled his head, left his heart pounding with fear. He wasn't worthy of it, he would do something wrong, he would lose Pitch. He couldn't face the truth of it.

'I can feel you,' Pitch said, softly. 'Right now.'

Jack knew that Pitch wasn't talking about the body contact.

'I don't mean to make it about me,' Jack said, wishing that he could turn his fear off, shove it into a box and drop it off the edge of a cliff. It didn't seem fair that Pitch could read his fears *all* the time. Offering a supportive gesture suddenly didn't seem supportive at all, if Pitch could read all the fears behind it.

'That is not what I meant,' Pitch said, finally facing him. They were so close that Pitch could lean down and kiss him easily. Pitch seemed to have noticed that too. His eyes flickered down once, looked at Jack's lips, and then he looked up again, something intense creeping into his eyes, flaring his pupils.

Jack couldn't close his eyes as Pitch leaned towards him. He made the tiniest of noises when he felt a hot palm on the back of his neck. He was over-sensitive. All the magic, the energy, the draocht – whatever it was – left him feeling like his skin was too thin a container for everything he held inside of him. Pitch didn't close his eyes either, though his eyelids lowered, a small smirk tugged up one side of his mouth.

Jack trembled when Pitch made contact. The kiss was sweetly compelling. Lips dragged across his. A tongue trailed slowly across his bottom lip, the tip of it slipped teasingly into his mouth. Pitch paused, breathing hotly against his lips, forehead pressed into his, a nose alongside his nose, pressing into his skin.

'Your fear is a gift, Jack. A difficult gift, at times. But a gift.'

Jack closed his eyes, a small pang of hurt twisting through him. He tilted his head up and Pitch kissed him again in response.

They broke apart at a sudden cheer and then a round of raucous applause. Jack flushed blue when he realised that the fae were watching them. Even Gwyn was chuckling in appreciation. Jack felt embarrassed, but when he looked up at Pitch, the feeling disappeared. Pitch faced them all calmly. He didn't look bothered by the interruption at all.

Jack grinned without thinking. Pitch didn't realise it; but he looked like he belonged.

Good News, Bad News

Chapter Notes

We've hit 400 kudos you guys. I just, I mean, seriously, I don't even have the words anymore. Not anything eloquent anyway. THANK YOU for your kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and your awesome comments. I am not exaggerating when I say I would not be posting this frequently or be giving this story as much attention without you all.

Jack was trying to see how many elves would voluntarily stick their tongues to a block of ice, even once they had seen their fellows get stuck. This was a game he had played on the elves before, and – strange creatures they were – would fight each other to get a chance to stick to the ice. He was up to six elves when he felt a sharp jab in the back of his hand.

He turned, ready to yell at whatever elf had poked him, and then broke out into a grin.

‘Baby Tooth!’

He smiled when she ducked her head coquettishly, and then she flew into upturned palm of his hand and snuggled against his thumb. She gleamed healthily, green and violet, turquoise and jade.

‘If you’re here, that means Toothiana is here too, doesn’t it?’

She nodded, squeaked an affirmative.

‘How’ve you been?’

Baby Tooth flared her feathers, smiled, and then shrugged. He absently waved a farewell to the elves. Several of the elves waved back, and one knocked another in the head by accident. Jack had never seen elves try and hit each other while stuck to the ice before. He paused, watching the escalating violence. He was tempted to stay, but he hadn’t seen Toothiana in a long time.

He flew down through the Workshop, thinking that she’d be with North, but halfway down Baby Tooth took a different direction and jerked her head, indicating that he should follow.

Jack frowned when he realised they were going to Pitch’s room.

He landed quietly and Baby Tooth pointed in the direction of the door, which was ajar. He crept up, and Baby Tooth was silent as she waited on his shoulder. He didn’t dare peek in, but he waited by the doorframe, catching the conversation halfway through.

‘-things I can accept, Pitch. But you have to understand that I saw what you did to him, when you were the Nightmare King,’ Toothiana said, voice far graver than usual.

Pitch didn’t answer, or if he did, it was too quiet for Jack to catch.

‘If you hurt him again, I’m going to smack you down so fast that you won’t remember ever being anything other than three feet tall.’

‘Noted,’ Pitch said. ‘Are you quite done?’

There was a pause, and Jack frowned, hoping that he wasn't about to overhear Tooth and Pitch start arguing in the way that he and Bunnymund had.

'Are you okay?' Toothiana asked, and Jack's eyes widened. There was a stunned silence from within the room.

'I don't think I heard you correctly,' Pitch replied.

'It just, it has to be quite a culture shock for you, going from spending all that time on your own in your lair, to North's Workshop. Obviously Jack has been helpful, but you look tired. North says you spend a lot of your time training to fight the Unseelie fae?'

Jack leaned against the doorframe, frowning. He didn't know what he'd expected from Toothiana when she found out; threats, maybe. But this? She sounded genuinely concerned. And Jack agreed with her, Pitch did look tired these days. Jack didn't think he was actually down on energy, he had decided for himself that the smudges under his eyes, the drawn skin around his mouth signalled a deeper, internal pain.

'If you're asking me if I'm up to the challenge of-'

'I'm just asking you if you're okay, Pitch,' Toothiana said, laughing lightly. 'It's not an interrogation. I'm sure you get enough of that from North.'

'You and I – we're not friends,' Pitch said. It wasn't the firm denial that Jack had expected. There was confusion laced throughout the words. Toothiana had gotten him on the back foot. At his shoulder, Baby Tooth seemed to be listening just as closely.

'No, I know that,' Toothiana laughed again, though it wasn't ungentle. 'But Jack sees something in you, and North does, and even Sandy, who has always been a wonderful judge of character. I can extend some trust. Jack's got a good heart, even if it has been led astray in the past. He wouldn't be able to spend all that time with you and not see something worth sticking around for.'

A long silence. Jack wanted to know the expression on Pitch's face, but there was no way he was going to look into that room now. He couldn't help a small smile at Toothiana's assessment of Pitch, of himself. After the argument with Bunnymund, it seemed almost refreshing.

'One would think you're scared of me,' Toothiana said, and Pitch chuckled.

'You pack a mean punch.'

'I know,' Toothiana laughed again.

'You must be finding this difficult,' Pitch said suddenly. 'Not being in the thick of things.'

'Yes and no. I am *really* busy, especially now that I'm going out more often to pick the teeth up myself. I really missed that part of my job! I can't believe I let so many years pass! And, of course, being out and about more often has put me in a good position to collect information, and I don't mind that. I know that's helpful. But there's another part of me that just wants to cut the Each Uisge into tiny, little pieces. I've never liked him. Have you seen his *real* waterhorse teeth? They're nasty.'

Pitch laughed under his breath.

'Speaking of,' Toothiana said brightly, 'how are your teeth holding up?'

'Tooth!'

A brief commotion, where Jack put a hand over his mouth to stop himself from laughing out loud. He knew exactly what had happened.

'They don't look as...jagged. Are you taking care of them?'

'Do you *mind*?' Pitch sounded extremely affronted. He'd never liked being touched unexpectedly by any of the Guardians. Or, for that matter, most people. The only time he ever seemed to tolerate it, was when Jack offered.

'Whoops. Okay, okay,' Toothiana laughed.

Suddenly, Baby Tooth shot up and into the room before Jack could catch her and stop her. Jack heard her excited twittering and he lurched away from the doorframe, trying to look like he hadn't just been listening in on their conversation. How did one pretend they had only just arrived again? He was in the middle of trying to decide the best way to look innocent when Toothiana shot out of the room, the door flying open with a bang.

'*Jack!*' She flew straight into him, wrapping her arms around him and giving him a fierce hug. She smelled of warmth and honey and bird, her feathers rose and fell in excitement against his cheek. He returned the hug and couldn't help but smile. Pitch joined them, leaning against the doorway and looking thoroughly put out.

'You two had a nice chat?' Jack said, raising his eyebrows, and Pitch glared.

'We have training in an hour.'

Jack glowered, his mood suddenly sour.

Way to share the love, Pitch.

*

An hour and a half later, Jack was ready to scream.

They were alone in a snowfield. Not-training had started well enough. Pitch had suggested they just meld the golden light with Jack's frost until they got bored. But after about twenty minutes, Jack could see Pitch starting to slip into General-mode, or training-mode, or whatever mode he got in when he was with Gwyn. And a short while after that, Pitch had said, 'Do it again,' with an authority that left Jack bristling.

That sounded like training.

Now, after thirty minutes, Jack was sure that if he heard 'do it again,' one more time, he was going to turn the snow under Pitch's feet to ice and make him fall.

He couldn't properly explain to anyone else why he hated it so much – formal education, expectations of rigid or regimented activity. It was just an anathema to him. Just as Toothiana couldn't bear to see neglected teeth, or North looked aggrieved whenever he saw a broken toy, Jack felt gritty and twisted up every time someone ordered him to perform for them, whether it was standardised tests or being told to replicate the frost that he suddenly didn't feel like making anymore. It didn't matter who it was, but it certainly didn't help that Pitch was looking like he was about to toss the concept of 'not-training' out of the window.

‘Do it again,’ Pitch ordered, after Jack shot out a mass of frost lightning that refused to meld with the golden light.

‘This is *training!*’ Jack shouted, fingernails digging into the frozen wood of his staff. ‘*Stop* ordering me around. I’m not one of your soldiers. And I don’t want to be.’

Jack’s heart was hammering in his chest, he felt trapped. Pitch’s eyes narrowed, he opened his mouth to try and pull Jack back in line, no doubt, and then he paused. He tilted his head and looked at him, and Jack took a step backwards, because he wasn’t in the mood anymore. He didn’t want to do this ever again. If they wanted him to create snowstorms seeded with golden light, fine, he could do that. But if they wanted him to do the same thing over and over again on command, they had another thing coming.

‘You can’t tell me what to do, out here,’ Jack rasped.

Pitch frowned, looked like he was about to apologise. After a beat, he smirked.

‘Out here?’ Pitch said, softly.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I can’t tell you what to do *out here?* Does that mean there are places where I *can* order you around?’

Jack stilled, his heart stopped and then started pounding out a completely different beat. Pitch looked positively predatory. Pitch took a single step forwards and Jack actually had to summon some willpower to make sure he didn’t step back.

‘It’s just a saying,’ Jack said, but his whole body disagreed. When Pitch closed the gap between them, Jack realised that he was finding it hard to get past the tightening of his chest, the sense that he was dangerously off kilter.

Because he’d liked it, hadn’t he? Being shown what to do? Being told what to do? Once they were away from formal education and in the bedroom, things were very different. Yet another thing that Jack had been trying to avoid thinking about. That something he hated in pretty much every area of his life, became something that twisted him up in expectant knots when lust was involved.

‘Is it?’ Pitch said.

‘You’re twisting my words,’ Jack said, breathless.

‘Oh, am I?’ Pitch smiled.

‘Wait a minute- Stop looking at me like that!’ Jack said, looking away from Pitch’s hungry face, staring at the wood grain on his staff.

‘Like what, Jack?’

Jack swallowed past a cold dryness in his mouth. He had thought that maybe they were going to argue, that maybe Pitch was going to tell him to keep training. He hadn’t expected *this*.

He inhaled sharply when Pitch wrapped his fingers around Jack’s hand where it was clenched around the staff. His palm was warm on the back of his hand, there was a thin sheen of sweat connecting them. Jack felt the touch like electricity shooting up his arm.

'Lost for words? That's *so* unlike you,' Pitch said, smug.

Jack opened his mouth to say something, and couldn't think of anything to say. His mind was racing through all the times that Pitch had taken control in the bedroom and all the times Jack had *liked* it. He thought about how Pitch had wanted to tie him up, and it left him torn between a strange fear and a thick, persistent anticipation.

'I thought we were supposed to be training,' Jack said, trying to change the subject. He winced when he heard how thin his voice had become.

'I'm distracted,' Pitch said, trailing the hand that had covered Jack's up his forearm, over his shoulder, and then across the back of his neck and up into his hair. It created a line of warmth that made Jack shiver. The fingers now moving over his scalp tightened slowly on a handful of hair and tilted his head up and back, so that Jack was left looking into Pitch's eyes, breathless.

'Curious, aren't you?' Pitch said darkly.

'Maybe,' Jack said, licking his lips and noticing the way Pitch caught the movement. 'Maybe I'm a little curious.'

'You're a *lot* curious,' Pitch said, and Jack shuddered when Pitch closed the gap between them, pressing his body along Jack's, looking down at him with a dangerous expression on his face.

Jack gasped when Pitch pushed his head into the space between his neck and shoulder, and he thought for a minute that Pitch was going to bite him, or kiss, or lick. But instead Pitch inhaled deeply, and then again, and Jack realised that he was getting a better read on his fear. He was breathing fast and shallow when Pitch shifted so that his lips were nearly touching Jack's.

'Are you afraid of me, Jack?' Pitch whispered against his skin. 'Or are you afraid of how much you want to do what I say?'

Jack whimpered before his throat could catch and squash the sound.

'So eager to please, aren't you?'

Jack realised he was hard. He wanted to drop his staff and climb his way up Pitch's body until they forgot all about training and villains and what the Guardians thought. But he felt paralysed by the hand in his hair holding his head back with a tight grip, the mouth by his mouth, lips brushing against his with every word. Even the warm breath moving against his face felt like it was holding him in place.

'I think,' Pitch said, 'with the right *incentive*...'

But Pitch didn't finish the sentence. He pulled Jack's neck taut and Jack opened his mouth hungrily for the tongue that slipped inside. He dropped his staff and fisted Pitch's robe in his hands, pulling him closer even though there was no more space left between them. His head was swimming. Pitch kissed him like he was winning an argument, one that Jack was happy to have ceded. He was becoming addicted to the warmth of Pitch's mouth, the way Pitch's tongue would curl around his, first possessive, and then gentler, an acknowledgement.

Pitch broke the kiss and stepped back, moving the hand from Jack's hair to his shoulder instead. Jack felt dazed, Realised he was actually leaning against Pitch's hand. He took a step backwards and wished he didn't feel so unsteady.

'We stopped because why?' Jack said, confused.

'I'm training with Gwyn immediately after this,' Pitch said, taking several deep breaths. 'We don't have *time* to-'

'You are the worst,' Jack groaned, and then bent down to pick up his staff. He still felt shaky. 'The absolute *worst*.'

Pitch watched Jack, his blank expression hiding turmoil. Jack knew enough about Pitch by now to know that the blank expression meant that he was holding something back. He vindictively hoped that Pitch was just as turned on as he was, but he doubted it. Pitch seemed harder to rouse than Jack, and had a slower burn overall. Everything he did was more paced, and more intense for it.

'I'm afraid I cannot allow more training today,' Pitch said.

'We could try something different? I could probably do more, I guess,' Jack said, though the idea of finding himself in some kind of military drill made him want to declare a snow day for everyone and hide in a forest somewhere.

'No, you can't. This was a mistake. I saw the look on your face before. You cannot take being ordered around in the field, and I underestimated how...deeply ingrained that was.'

'Look, I'm sorry about th-'

'Stop,' Pitch said, holding up a hand. 'That is not something you can change. You don't have to be sorry for who you are. Just as I cannot be sorry for how easily I slip into giving orders at times like this.'

Pitch dragged a hand through his hair and stared up at the sky.

'Besides, it turns out that I am not particularly masterful at maintaining my concentration around you, either. And the yeti patrol around here at times. I don't imagine you fancy being caught by one of those wretched beasts.'

'They're not so bad,' Jack said, flushing. Pitch didn't look convinced.

Jack wasn't so convinced either. He'd come to think quite fondly of many of the yeti, and had even spent some time in the infirmary, helping to refresh icepacks and change bandages, watching the way they efficiently tended one another. But overall they were a stodgy bunch. They worked hard, but they didn't play hard. Jack could just imagine the expression they'd be greeted with if a yeti chanced across them, naked, in the snow. And they tended to report *everything* back to North.

'Okay, so, not a good idea,' Jack amended.

Jack suddenly wanted to ask if Pitch thought they'd be able to beat the shadows. He wanted to ask what happened when they weren't forced to live with each other for their own safety anymore. Would they still see each other? Would Pitch live in Kostroma? Would Jack go back to his shack?

Jack remembered how Pitch talked about the shadows – with despair, as though they would never end. He remembered Pitch telling North that they were likely all going to 'die horribly' in a confrontation with the shadows. And he thought about his own inability to commit, to truly trust anyone else. He pressed a foot deep into the snow and bit his tongue. The person who was going to screw this up was probably not going to be Pitch.

'Jack,' Pitch began, and Jack frowned. He didn't want to talk about it. He found that he didn't want to ask any of the questions on his mind. Not now.

'I guess I'll see you around tonight,' Jack said, moving his tongue in his mouth, tasting Pitch.

'You will,' Pitch said, concern in the creases of his brow.

'Yeah,' Jack said, and then flew away without a second look. Pitch was the first person who had ever made him truly aware of how his thoughts could run away from him sometimes.

Every time he thought he could push the world away, it always came back again. It was getting harder to ignore the fact that he still hadn't decided what he wanted from Pitch. The upcoming battle made it easier not to think about their 'thing.' And the chemistry that he could explore with Pitch made it easier not to think about the battle. He was hiding from one with the other, but what would he do if the battle went away and he and Pitch were still left standing?

Pitch had said he loved him, but did Jack feel the same way in return?

*

He felt restless. His strange afternoon with Pitch had left him more aware of how much he still didn't know about himself, about the situation they were both in. And it left him more aware of how precarious their lives were. The majority of Pitch's activities revolved around training and sleeping so that he could train again. The Guardians were either gathering knowledge or working on their seasonal holidays. Sandy stayed almost permanently at North's now, only leaving to spread his dreamsand amongst children.

Jack had never felt guilty for not being able to diligently apply himself like the rest of them. But he did now. It didn't matter that he couldn't go against his nature without causing himself significant distress, and it didn't matter that he'd come up with one of the most effective weapons yet – outside of Pitch's golden light – all he could see was the hours he spent wandering aimlessly through the Workshop, bored and restless and hating that he wasn't even supposed to wander off to make snow days, because it wasn't safe.

But the Nain Rouge hadn't come back. Augus hadn't whispered him out of any windows (though North's Workshop was now warded with another of the wards that Pitch had used in Kostroma). He didn't feel as though he was in any more danger than the rest of them. He couldn't help the children directly, he couldn't train, so what *could* he do? He felt helpless.

Eventually he found his way to the balcony where he and North had first observed the warriors training together. North wasn't there, and Jack was almost sad for it. He didn't really want to talk to someone, but he didn't want to be alone either.

Jack placed his forearms on the balcony railing, sitting on the bench provided. He placed his head on his arm, looking down. He yawned. He hadn't told anyone, but he was growing tired more often. He needed to sleep more. It was as though – over time – he wasn't growing accustomed to the hole inside of his soul. It wore at him. He worried sometimes that it grew bigger without his notice, slowly but surely, eroding something inside of him.

He knew that he was pushing himself more; making the ice more often, seeding the storms, and North had reminded him only recently that he had been through a great deal of emotional distress, all of these things could be contributing to the fatigue. But Jack felt a sense of dread inside of him, a thick and creeping apprehension that pressed behind his eyes and into the base of his spine and made his feet curl.

He worried that the gap inside of himself was growing wider. He worried that something crucial was leaking away from him, some vital energy, and he couldn't plug it up.

He didn't know how to tell North, he didn't want to make the other Guardians worry. He suspected Pitch knew. Sometimes, he thought Pitch worried about it too. Pitch pushed Jack to sleep more often than anyone else. He didn't want to give name to his fears. He didn't want to see Pitch's sad expression when he agreed with him, or said that nothing could be done.

Not everything had to be talked about.

Down below in the training arena, Pitch started producing the golden light. Jack watched, unable to stop himself from smiling into his arm. Already, the quality of light that Pitch was producing was so much stronger, it lingered longer, it had a wider spread. It didn't tax Pitch as much to produce it.

Gwyn started mimicking the drill, even though he was not producing any light. And so they continued, as they had done so for many afternoons and evenings now.

Jack's mind drifted, only to be brought back by a sharp, loud whoop of excitement.

Jack looked down and then stood up, exhaling hard when he saw Gwyn's sword guttering with the golden light. Pitch had stopped his drill and was shouting encouragement. It was one of Gwyn's retinue of soldiers that had lead the excited cry, and then one after another, they were cheering. Jack couldn't see Gwyn's face properly behind the whirling of his sword, but he could tell there was a fierce concentration there, could see it as the light he produced grew, grew again, until it was no longer guttering. Until it was a constant, steady glow attached to his sword, making him seem even more composed of light than usual.

'He did it,' Jack whispered to himself, smile broadening.

Gwyn persisted to the end of the drill and then with the final sweep of his sword, turned to face Pitch, raising his arms in the air in excitement. Pitch nodded slowly, and Gwyn stepped forward like he was about to pull Pitch into an embrace when he was suddenly piled upon by his own soldiers, shaking him, hugging him, slapping his armour roughly.

Gwyn shook them all off and Pitch said something, and several of the soldiers shouted in agreement. Then, Pitch and Gwyn faced each other, swords at the ready, and Jack watched as they began to spar. It took a few minutes for Gwyn to start producing the light again, but when he did, it was already stronger. It was still a thin imitation of what Pitch could create, but it was there, and it was unmistakably the same honey-golden light.

Jack watched them for about an hour. He wished their excitement could reach him. He was surprised it hadn't.

It occurred to him that maybe he had finally realised what all of this was for.

They were going to war.

*

North had decided that Gwyn's ability to produce the light was worth celebrating. Jack had listened as they had all gone outside to the training arena, to share beverages and liberal amounts of food and hearty claps on the back or whatever it was they did.

Jack had retreated to Pitch's room, curled up in the large armchair. He felt stupid doing it; he had his own bed, there were other overstuffed armchairs in the Workshop – heaps of them actually, as though North had collected every single Santa's throne, chair and armchair out there in the world and stuffed them into his own home. But this one smelled of Pitch; of woody spices and cinnamon. It held good memories. It was a familiar anchor in an unfamiliar world. There were even heavy

books stacked on top of one another nearby, and a small leather bound journal on the coffee table where Pitch mapped out strategies and ideas in an alien alphabet.

He pulled his hood over his hair and then tugged it further, over his eyes. He blocked out the late afternoon sun and the threat of war and the idea of Pitch in the thick of things with the Nain Rouge wanting his golden light and Augus Each Uisge wanting revenge and everyone wanting *something*.

When he woke up, the door was closed, and Pitch was by his bed, removing the leather strap from around his chest and letting the sword and its scabbard fall to the mattress. It was almost completely dark, and the factory was quieter than usual. Jack watched his silhouette, thought that Pitch had never looked more like the Nightmare King than when he was wreathed in shadow as he was now. And yet, he still looked completely different. Slighter, more himself, a softer look in his eye instead of that constant glint of cruelty.

‘Where is everyone?’ Jack said, sleepily.

‘They’re still outside, celebrating.’

‘Not you?’

‘Oh,’ Pitch said, something dark in his voice, that made Jack sit up straighter and rub his eyes awake. ‘I plan on celebrating in my own way.’

Jack swallowed, watched quietly as Pitch took off his robe, then his undershirt, then the thin, black pants. He folded the undershirt, the pants. He watched as Pitch put the robe back on, leaving it open, a thin line of skin picking up the outside light, highlighting the planes and angles of his muscles.

Pitch opened the first drawer in the chest by his bed and withdrew a small glass vial, pocketed it inside his robe, and then turned to face Jack.

His eyes were hidden in darkness, only circles of gold visible, but Jack could guess at the expression. His heart started to pound. His fingers dug into the armrest.

‘How much of that stuff do you have?’ Jack said, indicating the vial that he could no longer see.

‘Enough,’ Pitch said quietly.

Jack only shifted enough to look up, when Pitch walked up to him. And when Pitch leaned over him, bracing his arms on the armchair, Jack felt anticipation roar through him.

‘Two choices, Jack,’ Pitch said, voice deeper already. ‘Gentleness? Or to not think anymore?’

His thoughts clamoured and he wanted to claw them out. He didn’t want to be gently reassured. He didn’t know what, exactly, Pitch was offering. But he could guess. He only had to look at Pitch’s expression, and he could guess.

‘If you think you can stop me from thinking for a while, then...that one,’ Jack said, and hoped he was making the right decision. Something like fear curled inside of him, and Pitch hissed in response.

A hand fisted into his sweatshirt, gathering up a handful of the material and pulling Jack upwards, making him move with the force of Pitch’s strength.

‘If you want to stop at *any* point, you will tell me. Is that clear?’

Jack blinked and then nodded. One of his hands had unconsciously come up to brace himself on Pitch's arm. Pitch pulled him out of the chair and made sure that Jack had his feet under him, before stepping back.

'Strip,' Pitch said, quietly. It didn't matter how softly he said it, Jack knew an order when he heard one.

Jack's eyes flew open. He kept waiting for some inner part of him to rebel, to say that he wasn't into this whole being controlled and ordered about thing. But instead he felt a shiver of want go through him, and he clutched at his sweatshirt. After a brief hesitation, he pulled it up over his head and then held it in front of himself, because he was small, and lithe, and he didn't have the physique of a warrior, and it wasn't that he was *shy*, it was just that-

'The rest,' Pitch said, and Jack scowled as he dropped his sweatshirt and put his hands on the hem of his pants.

'Just because you act like you control everything, doesn't mean you *actually* control everything,' Jack grumbled.

He expected Pitch to reply with something snappy, some comeback, but instead Pitch watched him, face in shadow, gold eyes picking him out in the darkness. Jack shivered nervously under that gaze. He pulled his pants down and then stepped out of them, feeling like he was baring more than just his skin.

Pitch took a slow, audible breath, and then stepped forward. Jack's throat closed on a sound when a warm hand curled around the side of his face. Pitch had given him a choice between gentleness and whatever not thinking involved, so he hadn't expected the soft touch, the tender way the fingers curled around the shell of his ear.

'Good. You're doing so well, Jack,' Pitch said, and Jack had to close his eyes as the words split something inside of him, left him hurting and wanting at the same time. It shouldn't be so hard to hear praise, not when he wanted it so much, not when it mattered so much. A voice inside of him wanted to disagree, to say that maybe he could have done it faster, maybe he shouldn't have back-talked the way he did, maybe he-

The hand at the side of his face became a fist in his hair and he gasped at the pinpricks of pain in his scalp. Before his mouth could close again, Pitch's lips had found his, warmth spread through him. Pitch's other hand came up and trailed down his shoulder, his arm, squeezed his hand in the briefest reassurance before wrapping around his torso and steering him towards the wall. Pitch's hand felt huge, thumb around the front of him, and his fingers pressing into his back.

His back hit the wall hard, but the hand in his hair made sure his head didn't. As soon as Jack was against it, Pitch removed both hands and then stepped backwards, out of the kiss.

Jack tried not to squirm. Pitch was wearing his robe, but Jack was nude. With no points of contact between them, knowing that Pitch was watching him, he felt exposed.

When Pitch stepped forwards again, it was like he had come to some sort of decision.

He stroked both his hands down Jack's arms, starting at the curve of his shoulders, tracing down and finding the sensitive inside of both elbows, before warm, long fingers twined around his wrists. The hands tightened, anchoring him and shackling him. Jack resisted automatically, only for a second, when Pitch started to move both of his arms up. And then he closed his eyes and went with it, because that was the point, wasn't it?

He was surprised when one of his wrists was pinned back against the wall over his head, and then the other over that one. Pitch kept both of his wrists crossed with one hand, withdrawing the other to lightly scrape fingernails over Jack's ribs. Jack gasped. He was out of his element, and he knew it. It didn't matter that they'd given each other hand jobs against this wall, it didn't matter that they were already carnally familiar with one another. This was something that Pitch knew about, that Jack didn't.

'That will do nicely,' Pitch said, though the words were under his breath, as though not intended for Jack at all. Then Pitch bowed his spine, leaned in, drew Jack's lower lip between his teeth and pulled. Jack's arms jerked where they were pinned over his head. He wanted to reciprocate, to offer touch in return, to hold on, *something*.

The hand around his wrists tightened. It didn't hurt, but the pressure was uncomfortable.

'You will keep your wrists above your head, like this, until I tell you otherwise. Do you understand?'

Pitch let go of Jack's wrists slowly. Jack resisted the urge to lower them, keeping them in the position they'd been put in. Pitch's eyes drifted up to make sure, and then Jack caught a gleam of teeth as Pitch smiled.

'Wouldn't it just be easier to tie me up?' Jack said, and then he bit his own lip, because he hadn't meant to say *that* out loud, had he?

'I don't want easier,' Pitch said, 'Not to mention there's no good quality rope here that I'd trust on your skin. But, Jack, maybe I don't want easier. Maybe I want to know you can do it on your own.'

Pitch knelt at Jack's feet. Jack's breath stuttered to a stop, and he assumed Pitch was going to give him a blow job maybe. Then he realised he should probably throw all of his assumptions out of the window when a tongue licked a hot stripe from the jut of his hip up to the base of his ribs. When a hot mouth sealed over skin and sucked hard, Jack's head thumped back against the wall and his eyes closed.

Both of Pitch's hands reached up and pressed flat at the centre of his chest, a warm mass over his heart, and then they parted in separate directions. Jack couldn't stop himself from moaning when fingers found both nipples at the same time. The mouth at his ribs shifted a short distance and started again, sucking hard, drawing marks forth on his skin.

He was hard, wished that Pitch would divert his attention, but Pitch seemed happy to harass Jack's chest, to scrape teeth over the side of his torso, leaving it tingling. Jack's hands clenched above his head, fingers closed on open air. It was becoming harder to concentrate. He was starting to realise that if he didn't actually focus on his wrists, he was going to drop them. The urge to resist placing a hand in Pitch's hair, to touch the warm skin against him, was becoming increasingly difficult.

Jack felt uncontained as time went by. The sensations were enough to keep him hard, and they felt good, but he wanted more. The air he sucked into his mouth had already eroded the warmth that Pitch had created there when he had kissed him. Jack knocked his head back against the wall again in frustration. Pitch didn't seem to be in any hurry, and Jack had a sudden, awful image of Pitch doing this all night. He didn't have that kind of patience. He'd *never* had that kind of patience.

'Pitch,' Jack breathed.

'Mm?' Pitch didn't even take his mouth off Jack's skin, and Jack felt the hum move directly through him. His fingernails curled into his palms, and the sting made his mind clear.

'Pitch,' Jack was embarrassed at how he sounded, and he ground his teeth together.

He couldn't do this. He didn't know why he thought he could. He wasn't made for this slow, thorough attention. Jack tried to gather his thoughts together, tried to think of a way to shut this down, to redirect. He felt an ache in his left hand and realised that his fingers were splayed stiff, tense, snow drifting from his fingertips. He had clearly bitten off more than he could chew. This wasn't his-

Pitch stood up, wrapped hands around Jack's torso and hoisted him bodily up the wall, scattering his attention once more.

'I was going to take my time with you,' Pitch said, as he moved Jack's legs until Jack got the message and hooked them around Pitch's waist. He crossed his ankles behind Pitch's back and realised that between his legs and the single broad hand braced underneath his thigh, there was nothing else holding him up against the wall.

He started to drop his wrists in order to brace himself, but Pitch caught the movement in a flash, and then his eyes slid to Jack's. He felt pinned by that eye contact. His arms stopped moving, and then he swallowed and moved them back up over his head again, one wrist over the other. *Sorry*, he thought. He'd done the wrong thing. Would Pitch stop? Was that the point? What was the point? What if he got everything wrong and then...

Pitch made a sound of frustration and Jack was sure he'd done the wrong thing. His ankles locked harder behind Pitch's back, pre-empting his leaving.

'I'm sorr-'

'No, it's me. It's not you, I promise,' Pitch said, and kissed his way from Jack's jaw line to his mouth. He paused there, sighed. 'I offered to make you not think anymore, and I'm not doing a very good job of that, am I?'

'But it's not your f-'

'Two things,' Pitch said, matter-of-fact, as though he didn't have Jack hoisted up against a wall. 'First, you're doing fine, Jack. Second, there's nothing to fail. You can't get this wrong. I'm not going *anywhere*, remember?'

'I just,' Jack paused, he didn't know if he could finish the sentence. It was too raw. The words had sprung up within him, waited on the tip of his tongue to be spoken. With Pitch's mouth so close to his, hot breath mingling with his colder ones, he felt safer. Enclosed.

'I just don't want to disappoint you,' Jack said, heart hitching. He felt as though in saying it out loud, he'd somehow given Pitch an excuse to point out all the ways Jack could be disappointing. He wished he could take the sentence back, but he couldn't. He knew Pitch had heard it from the way fingers gripped harder at his thigh, in the way lips turned and brushed over his briefly.

'I cannot imagine how you could possibly disappoint me,' Pitch said.

He kept his lips by Jack's and then his hand moved beneath his robe. Jack shifted his head so that he could slip his tongue into that warmth, court the heat that had deserted his own mouth. Pitch responded automatically, even while his hand kept moving beneath his robe. The kissing went a long way to allaying Jack's sudden paranoia, and his thoughts started to fragment and drift as he touched the hot roof of Pitch's mouth with the tip of his tongue, sighing happily when Pitch shuddered.

Jack's eyes flew open when he felt wet fingertips trailing up between his legs. Pitch's other hand gripped his thigh even tighter, and then Jack choked off a sound when he felt fingers stroking at his entrance. His concentration was torn between keeping his wrists above his head, and the teasing pressure beneath him. Between the two, the rest of his thoughts fled.

Pitch caught Jack's cry with his mouth when he pushed the tip of his finger in. The angle was so different, Jack had never felt quite like this before. Pitch was literally holding him up, though Jack's legs braced around Pitch were helping, it was the hand beneath his thigh that was supporting him and keeping the angle right. When Pitch's finger slid in deeper, Jack moaned loudly, heat spreading through him. And when the finger curled, Jack's fingers curled hard into his palms in response.

With no preamble, no more teasing, Pitch undid Jack quickly, first with one finger, and then with two. Jack felt pinned against the wall by Pitch, by the mouth on his lips, the fingers inside of him. Pitch caught almost all of the vocalisations that Jack made by swallowing them down, allowing them to hum through his mouth.

Pitch's mouth broke away and Jack tilted his head back, braced it against the wall. Pitch's fingers moved in a hard, firm rhythm. It was too much, it was not enough, Jack's arms were aching, his legs trembled. He wanted more, and yet what he already had was too much.

'What do you want, Jack?' Pitch said, voice thick, and Jack needed several seconds to process the question, and then even longer to think of a response.

'More,' Jack said finally.

Pitch's fingers curled again, brushed against his prostate, and Jack's shout was muffled against Pitch's mouth, stars burst behind his eyelids. More, he thought. He tore his mouth away, whined, tried to find something like a sentence.

'Fuck me, *please*,' Jack said, not caring that he was begging, his wrists forgotten where he had them pinned above his head. When he felt Pitch smile wickedly against his cheek and he bared his teeth in a snarl of frustration.

'Not thinking much now, are you?' Pitch said, sounding entirely too smug for his own good.

'You *bastard*,' Jack managed, voice breaking as fingers stretched him mercilessly, left him burning and hungry and full but not full enough. 'You-'

His voice disappeared on a particularly hard thrust, and his hands clenched on air. He realised this was the roughest Pitch had ever been with him, and he *liked* it.

'Stop talking,' Pitch said, voice rough, and Jack whimpered in acknowledgement. He didn't have any voice left for talking anyway.

When Pitch withdrew his fingers, Jack made a sound somewhere between want and anticipation and frustration. It growled out of him, and Pitch kissed him in response. Fierce, compelling kisses that left Jack mindless. When Pitch's tongue started to withdraw from his mouth, his own teeth bit down, held Pitch's tongue still. Pitch groaned into his mouth, and Jack groaned in response, dizzy.

When he felt Pitch press against him, he forgot how to breathe. Pitch didn't pause, didn't wait, pushed in and dragged Jack onto him with both of his hands gripping his thighs so hard that he knew he'd bruise. Jack felt like an exposed nerve. In this position, he was more aware of Pitch's size. There was pain, but it was bearable. He had to open his mouth to stop himself from biting

through Pitch's tongue, strangled inhaled catching in his throat, leaving his lungs sore.

'Breathe, Jack,' Pitch said, but there was a self-satisfied smile in his voice as he pushed deeper, past the point where Jack had asked him to stop the first time, leaving him split with sensation and heat, rolling his head against the wall.

'Decided against breathing, then?' Pitch asked, sounding so solicitous as he withdrew slowly. 'It's going to be too late to start now, I'm afraid.'

Pitch's mouth caught Jack's ragged cries as he started a firm, insistent rhythm. It demanded Jack's full attention, rocked him against the wall, left his whole body trembling. He was so close, his spine was already starting to arch, there was no way he was going to last.

One of Pitch's hands shifted, and he jerked when he felt Pitch's fingers grip the base of him, creating a sudden, intense wave of sensation in his lower torso that culminated in a sharp ache. He whined, and Pitch smiled against his lips.

'You will come when I do, Jack,' Pitch said, and Jack realised that the fingers gripping him in the way they did had stopped him from coming. He whimpered. Pitch always lasted longer than he did. He didn't know how long he could handle this. His arms shook hard where he held them above his head, his shoulders hurt.

Pitch's rhythm shifted to intense, longer strokes. Jack's voice broke, he heard Pitch's breathing rough against his cheek and hoped that meant Pitch was close, because Jack didn't know how long he could hang on the peak of sensation like this. Already his spine wanted to arch again, his toes curled hard behind Pitch's back. He became vaguely aware that Pitch seemed to like this part, the part where Jack was driven past the limits of pleasure he thought he could contain, where sounds spilled out of him and he couldn't tell what they were anymore.

Please, he thought. Please, please, please.

'Soon,' Pitch breathed against him, and Jack realised that he'd spoken out loud.

Pitch sped up again, rougher than before, balancing Jack somewhere between the pain of too much and a searing heat of pleasure that spread like fire throughout all of his nerve endings. He felt a scream building up somewhere inside of him but it fractured into pieces before he could utter it, breaking out of his throat on each exhale, short, sharp noises that followed Pitch's uncompromising pace.

Pitch's voice broke on a moan and the hand gripping the base of him suddenly started moving, up and down, thumb brushing roughly over the head of him. And Jack wanted to warn him, wanted to say something, because it was going to be a matter of *seconds* before he came.

Pitch thrust deep, paused, shouted hoarsely into Jack's shoulder and Jack followed a moment later, feeling Pitch empty inside of him, the hand still moving between his legs. His mind imploded with light, it left sparks behind his eyes, and he wanted to shout, or scream, but his voice was shattered and he couldn't manage more than a hoarse cry that stripped his throat.

He didn't know how long they stayed like that for, he didn't care. His mind was empty. He only had simple things left to him; gratitude for the wall behind his back, an awareness of a persistent ache in his shoulder blades, the way Pitch's muscles moved beneath his ankles, the hand that still gripped the base of his thigh and held him steady, a warm hand still wrapped around him, Pitch inside of him, softening slowly, leaving Jack feeling surrounded.

Pitch withdrew carefully, but Jack still grunted. He had no doubt he'd be feeling the results of that for a little while.

'Unhook your legs,' Pitch said gently, and Jack blinked. It was as though he'd forgotten about everything except the sensations that had been evoked inside of him. *Legs*, he reminded himself. He lifted one ankle off the other and then grimaced as he lowered them. His forehead relaxed when a hand smoothed through his hair.

'You can lower your arms now,' he said, and Jack – dazed – blinked once and then straightened his fingers from where they'd been pressing hard into his palms. He winced at that, his palms felt sore, his fingers ached. Pitch hissed and stepped closer, peering at the skin in the darkness. *Night vision*, Jack remembered.

'You've cut yourself,' Pitch said, and Jack nodded stupidly, because he hadn't even noticed, but now that Pitch had said it, he thought it was probably true.

Pitch's hands came up and took Jack's wrists and very slowly eased them to the side, and Jack's shoulders flared with pain and he gasped. Pitch murmured something to himself. Fingers pressed into the muscles knotted around Jack's left shoulder, and his other hand stroked Jack's arm down until it was resting by his side. He repeated the treatment with the right shoulder, seeking out the knots, coaxing Jack's limbs back into movement. Jack sighed in relief when both of his arms were down by his side again.

And then he reached out and touched Pitch, spread his arms around Pitch's side. He took a single step and then slumped forwards, exhausted, resting his head against Pitch's chest and closing his eyes.

Pitch drew him backwards towards the bed, and Jack stood dumbly while Pitch took the sword off the bed and leaned it against the wall. He didn't draw the covers back, but instead lay on top, drawing Jack down with him.

He took one of Jack's hands in his own and examined the palm, making a sound of disapproval in his throat. A moment later he covered Jack's cool palm with his own, and Jack's lips quirked upwards, because that was nice, sweet even. And then he gasped, surprised, when he felt warmth shoot through the skin of his palms, when he saw the light flare under his eyelids. Pitch was *healing* him.

He realised he'd never experienced it directly before, only witnessed it, and both times in response to life-threatening injuries; not for simple scratches in his own palms. The light moved underneath his skin, he could actually feel flesh responding, and the pain disappeared almost immediately. It left him feeling calm and secure, and when the light died down again, he found that he missed it.

Pitch took Jack's other hand in his own and repeated the gesture, lingering over a particularly deep series of nail marks. Jack wondered what it felt like to produce it. If it was the same having that light radiate through your body naturally, as it was to experience it as a warm, healing gift.

'I'm coming to you with all future papercuts and grazes,' Jack murmured, and Pitch kissed the side of his head, tenderly.

'You may,' Pitch said, amusement colouring his voice.

Pitch shifted Jack until he was tucked alongside Pitch's body. Until they were spooning each other, side by side. Pitch's height meant that he ended up resting his chin in Jack's hair, an arm slung over his side, the other pillowed beneath Jack's head. Jack's whole body ached, but he realised he

didn't mind it. He thought, on reflection, he'd made the right decision. To not think anymore.

There was only one thought niggling at him now, persistent and demanding he give it voice.

'Did I...do okay?' Jack whispered. Pitch's arm tightened around him. The chin in his hair became a kiss on the top of his head.

'Perfect,' Pitch replied.

'Really?' Jack asked, double-checking. It seemed important.

'Perfect,' Pitch said, a quiet emphasis in his voice. 'Aren't you tired?'

'Sleepy,' Jack replied, and wriggled until he was comfortable. He reached up and grasped Pitch's hand with his own, and squeezed it once, before drifting off into a calm darkness.

*

Jack woke to Pitch shifting the blankets beneath him until he was able to tug one free. Hurriedly, he covered Jack with it. When he saw that Jack was awake, he grimaced apologetically.

'North is at the door,' he said, and Jack's eyes widened. He lifted up on one elbow, made as if to get up, thought maybe he should *hide*, because he was naked in Pitch's bed and it would have been ridiculously obvious what they were doing; but Pitch shook his head. 'No, it should be fine. He is very afraid, it has nothing to do with us.'

That was not nearly as reassuring as Pitch thought it was. Jack kept himself propped up on one elbow.

Pitch undid the lock and opened the door, and Jack winced as artificial light flooded in from the landing. North saw Jack at once, and his eyes narrowed as he took in the blanket, Jack's nakedness, his rumpled hair, and then he looked at Pitch like he wanted to take him aside for a very long lecture, or some violence. Pitch stood his ground, and North's eyes slid back to Jack again, and then finally his shoulders slumped.

'North?' Jack said, 'What's wrong?'

'I am having some bad news,' North said, face grim. 'The battle is upon us. Gwyn was just informed by one of his spies what the Unseelie Court will be targeting next.'

Pitch took a deep breath, reading the fears before North had a chance to say them out loud.

'Schools,' he said, 'Primary schools?'

Something far colder than his normal body temperature clenched hard around Jack's heart. Schools? *Children*? He thought of the Nain Rouge and her insatiable hunger. Of Angus Each Uisge and his terrible charm, his ability to compel others with his voice, his habit of cannibalising human flesh. He thought of the other Unseelie Fae, the powers they might have, the carnage they could wreak. He had thought it was bad enough that people were being intermittently attacked when seeking fresh water at lakes and rivers, but this was something else entirely. This was direct, a forceful move against the humans.

'Gwyn wants you both ready for a round table meeting. I will see you down there?'

'Of course,' Pitch said smoothly, and North left.

Pitch closed the door behind him, washing the room in shadows once more.

‘We’re not ready,’ Pitch whispered. ‘We’ll never be ready.’

Pitch turned to face him, and something heavy and sickening dropped through Jack’s chest and landed somewhere in his belly as they made eye contact.

Pitch was afraid.

Make Your Own Fate

Chapter Notes

Second last chapter... I can hardly believe it. A few people have asked so I'll remind everyone: there is a sequel. The sequel will be called 'Into Shadows We Fall' for those keeping an eye out. :)

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Thank you again for all of your lovely kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks and comments. The comments keep me going. :)

*

Also, FANART. Djinngin drew [the most amazing illustration of the Nain Rouge](#), looking very nicely creepy. :)

Pitch was afraid.

A flash of anxiety raced through Jack. He didn't know what to say, didn't know whether he should acknowledge it. He didn't know whether it was better to give Pitch the comfort of pretending he hadn't heard that fear ripple through his words. He shifted in the bed, sat straighter, and as he shrugged the blanket off his shoulders, he uttered a pained sound before he could swallow it down.

The hell?

He experimentally shrugged his shoulders up and down, winced, then pressed his right hand to his left shoulder, sending a colder temperature through it.

'Damn,' Pitch said, walking up to the bed and facing Jack. 'We shouldn't have done what we did.'

'Are you serious?' Jack laughed as he rolled his shoulders a few more times, trying to smooth out the stiffness. 'If this were any other time, we would have slept through until morning, and my shoulders wouldn't be feeling like this. Though, I have to ask, is rope worse than that? Because if it is...'

'If you are tied correctly, it tends to be the opposite. It gives you something to brace against, and something to relax into. I was demanding. I suppose I, too, thought you'd have some time to sleep it off.'

'I guess that's not happening,' Jack said, bubbles of fear foaming up inside of him.

Primary schools. Lots of children. Not some Nightmare King who mostly just brought children bad dreams. Villains who weren't messing around. Who didn't care if adults knew about them. Who were already causing human militaries to mobilise.

Jack didn't make eye contact as he slid off the bed and walked over to his clothing, grimacing as he pulled his sweater on. He was sore all over, but that was a pleasant soreness. His shoulders, on the other hand, were stubbornly refusing to settle. Pitch also started to dress, and the silence between

them was awkward. Jack had only seen Pitch truly scared twice before – that he knew of, anyway – when he'd broken down briefly outside of North's Workshop, after healing North. And – Jack realised, with a sinking sense of dread – when August had visited them in Kostroma and offered a false olive branch when his original plan to kill them had been thwarted.

'How much of this is you being scared that you can't destroy the shadows,' Jack said, hesitantly, as he reached out for his staff. 'And how much of this is you being scared of *August*?'

'You don't want to talk about this, Jack,' Pitch said, prohibitively. He tugged his boot on with a vicious yank, and Jack frowned.

'Hey, I'm talking about it, so it seems like I do,' he said.

'No, you *don't*. Any answer I give you is only going to exacerbate your own fears. Which I will then read. On top of my own. And it is not as though I can stop myself from receiving the transmissions of scared wights down in the round table room. Gwyn has invited some new beings, it seems. *Wonderful*. Perhaps you could just tell yourself that *everyone* is scared and be done with it.'

Jack shook his head, something wasn't adding up.

'I'm not buying it. If you had so many problems with reading the fears of others, then...you wouldn't *push* so damned hard at mine. You're bothered by what *you're* feeling, and you're blaming that on all of us.'

Pitch didn't pause as he pulled on his other boot, but he didn't reply either. Jack didn't want to be right, but he knew something about wanting to hide from reality. After all, he embraced denial whole-heartedly as a coping mechanism.

'I mean, so we're not ready. Sure. Do you think we were ready to face the Nightmare King? He nearly had us owned, and he knew it. The Nightmare King weakened almost all of us and had us down to *one* believer. And Jamie wasn't our trump card, he was a fluke! A lucky fluke. None of us could have predicted that he was so stubborn he could outlast those shadows, and he *did*. And that was just...a bunch of dumb Guardians against the shadows. Not the Seelie Court, not their allies, not *you*.'

Pitch was watching him warily. Jack opened the door to let the light back in, so he could see Pitch's face better. There was no one up on their landing, so Jack continued, undaunted.

'You can be scared, Pitch, but it doesn't mean we're going to fail. Maybe we can't destroy the shadows completely this time around, but we're not going in to do that, are we? I'm going to save some children, and then whatever else happens on top of that is a bonus. At the very least we're going to make some really pretty snowstorms.'

Pitch's expression shifted to something still, unwavering. It was the blank expression that had once been so frightening, and now didn't fool Jack at all. Jack knew he was getting through to him.

'You really do think we're going to fail, don't you?' Jack said, shaking his head. 'And you're still helping us. What is that? Some kind of death wish? You just can't help it? Genetic imprinting? What is the point of fighting even when you know it's pointless? Only *heroes* do things like that.'

Jack walked up to Pitch and looked down. From this angle, with Pitch sitting on the bed and Jack standing over him, Jack felt as though he had to look after him. It was a strange sensation. He was seeing a secret; all those vulnerabilities that were usually kept so well-hidden. It wasn't that Pitch

wasn't capable of looking after himself; Jack knew that he was more than able.

Jack put his staff down on the bed next to Pitch. Then he reached out hesitantly, knowing how Pitch could react to unsolicited touch. He stroked his fingertips across Pitch's cheek, following the curve of his cheekbone. He raised his other hand and rested his palm against Pitch's other cheek, cradling his face. Pitch exhaled hard, but didn't look up. Jack's shoulders ached, but the pain was smoothing out as time passed.

'We can get through this, you know,' Jack said, wanting it to be true.

Pitch looked up at him, and there was a wry amusement in the narrowing of his eyes, in the mocking twist of his mouth. Pitch looked ageless, young and ancient all at once, transformed by the harrowing grief that was etched across his face. Jack knew it was more than the loss of Seraphina, though that would be more than enough. It was the loss of entire cultures, of a Golden Age, of warriors and colleagues and lovers and Tsars and Tsarinas and everything he had ever known. It was even the loss of himself, taken over by those shadows, invaded by them and forced to pay penance for their crimes.

'You've lost too much to have to go through this again,' Jack said, sadly. 'For it to ever be fair.'

Pitch's head jerked back, eyes widening, but Jack's fingers tightened, one of his hands shifted until it stroked through Pitch's hair. He felt unusually bold, daring even, as though seeing evidence of Pitch's fear had given him an internal strength he hadn't known he could pull from.

Slowly, he lowered his forehead to Pitch's, and then sighed. When Pitch folded two arms around him, he shook his head, he wanted the rest of the world to disappear. He knew everyone was downstairs, he knew Gwyn was probably waiting for Pitch, he knew they were taking up precious time. He didn't want to leave. He wanted to encase both of them in a protective bubble, where they could heal from old wounds before dealing with anything new, anything more.

And he knew – in that moment – that Pitch felt exactly the same way. They couldn't pull away from each other. Jack had no more words left. He couldn't offer empty promises. He couldn't promise they would come out of it alive, he couldn't even promise that they'd be able to save the children, which struck a hollow note of pain inside of him. He couldn't tell Pitch they were ready, he couldn't wave a magic wand and change the situation they were in.

'I want to believe,' Pitch said, carefully, 'that the way I feel for you would make anything possible. But my life has taught me that the *opposite* is true.'

Jack's eyes squeezed shut on tears, hurt knifing through him. It wasn't something he felt for himself, but something he felt for Pitch, knowing what he was thinking of, knowing what had happened to shatter his own faith in himself. Words rushed to his mouth, sat heavy on his tongue. Not a single one was worthy of Pitch's grief.

'We should go down,' Pitch said, voice rough. 'Can you handle a round table meeting?'

'I'm just going to have to, aren't I?' Jack said and they both reluctantly disengaged from each other. Pitch handed Jack his staff, and then reached for the sword he'd propped against the wall by the bed, next to the chest of drawers.

Pitch walked out first and Jack followed. Just as he was about to clear the threshold of the doorway, Pitch turned back and placed a gentle hand on the side of Jack's face. Jack resisted the urge to list into the warmth. If he did, he'd drag Pitch back in the room. He'd close the door, lock it, pretend that nothing bad could ever touch them.

‘Thank you,’ Pitch murmured, and Jack blinked in surprise.

‘I didn’t do anything, though.’

Pitch smiled a small, secret smile, and then walked down the steps. Jack followed, bewildered, wondering what on earth he’d done to deserve gratitude.

*

His skin itched. His spine tingled. The round table room was filled with fae that Jack had never seen before. Like the ones at the Wild Hunt, many had strange or unusual characteristics about them; one wagged a fluffy dog’s tail, another blinked crocodile’s eyes, yet another apologised every time he coughed and insects fell out of his mouth. It was worse than what he’d felt at the Wild Hunt, though at least now he understood that it was a result of proximity to the fae, and it was only temporary. Still, his blood felt like it had been replaced with tiny needles. He wanted to scratch at himself until the sensations went away.

Jack’s eyes glazed over halfway through Gwyn’s introductions to all the different fae. ‘Someone of wherever, royalty in yet another district, friend of the selkies,’ there was only so much of that he could follow. He was – however – surprised to see the swan maiden from the Wild Hunt. When Gwyn got around to her, the fog lifted from his mind and he looked at her.

She wore the same curved, brutal daggers strapped around her waist, and there was a wicked, mischievous expression on her face.

‘This is Gulvi, one of my informants; she’s Unseelie.’

The rest of the Seelie Fae took that in their stride, seemingly unsurprised to see her there. But North’s eyes widened, and Bunnymund’s ears dropped.

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ Bunnymund said.

‘I know what I’m doing,’ Gwyn said, ‘And I know Gulvi.’

Jack remembered how Gulvi had threatened him at the beginning of the Wild Hunt. After Jack had responded, matching her strength with his own, she’d left him alone. Even treated him with respect. And yet...he could see it, now that Gwyn had pointed it out. Her mischief ran towards the malicious, and there was a cruel glint in her dark, swan eyes.

‘Darlings, if anyone has a problem with me, we can take it outside, no?’ she said, grinning. She stroked one of her clawed fingers down the side of a knife-blade, and looked out a challenge to Bunnymund.

‘None of that, Swan,’ Gwyn said, grim.

‘Dear me, you’re no fun. Where’s that wild creature I saw riding with us during the Hunt?’

Gwyn didn’t dignify that with a response. And then he pointed to yet another fae, and the introductions started again and Jack tried to hang on and keep focused. It was impossible. It was a waste of time.

He slammed his staff against the floor. All eyes turned to him when frost shot upwards. His breath deserted him, replaced by the horrible weight of their stares, the strange sensations that coiled inside of him. And then he remembered his anger, and focused on it, used it to pull himself back into the present.

‘This is a lot of pomp and circumstance considering *children are in danger*. Can we talk about that part first and then – if there’s time – do the introductions second? Or maybe never?’

Jack ignored the way several of the fae glared at him, as though he was a child. Jack didn’t care about interrupting their etiquette. He obviously wasn’t one of them and he didn’t have to play by their rules. They were in North’s Workshop after all, not in some Seelie palace. He stared directly at Gwyn.

Come on, he thought, *tell us what’s going on*.

‘Jack speaks true, I suppose,’ Gwyn said. ‘Alright, Gulvi, tell us what you told me, and we’ll go from there.’

For once, Jack’s concentration didn’t waver.

‘Four primary schools, as a start. They do not wish to split their power further, at this stage. It is to be a single strike, within eighteen of those strange, human hours. So tomorrow then. Scotland, Ireland, Wales, England. This is the base of the new Unseelie Court’s power. August Each Uisge and the Nain Rouge are taking a school. All the better for August to keep an eye on that rabid dog, yes? My dear friend Ash Glashtyn is taking another, with the help of some kelpies – though la, I am rather surprised there are any left after the way they have been warring in the waters.’

Jack suddenly realised that all along, while Gwyn had been taking the time to train, while Pitch had been strengthening his light, a war really *had* been going on. Spirits were battling each other, maybe right now. Wights were being ousted from their homes by August and the living shadows. Spirits that relied on lakes and rivers in particular were being evicted from their environments, were over-crowding other regions. The most land-dependent fae had died, wasting away, prevented from having any contact with their core power; a creek or a stream, a freshwater lake or a brook. Where immortality had saved them from violence, it could not save them from being sundered from their homes.

‘Dullahan will take a third; Jenny Greenteeth will take the fourth, with her band of attorcrophe, which will obviously be the weakest link, no? And there you have it.’

‘What are they planning on doing to the children?’ North asked, and the swan maiden shrugged.

‘Kill them? Eat them? Whatever it is that they feel like doing, I suppose. Jenny might drown them. The Glashtyn will do nothing of course. The Nain Rouge may eat the souls of some. Do I look like a reader of minds? Ask Ondine something so stupid.’

The look she directed in North’s direction was withering, as though she couldn’t believe North would ask such an impertinent question. Jack noticed none of the Seelie fae seemed bothered by her attitude, either. And they were meant to be the good guys. Were children worth so little to them? Were humans so insignificant?

She turned back to the other fae and looked at each of them, instead.

‘The Nain Rouge has the majority of the shadows, and August – the Nightmares. We shall leave them to those who can produce this magical shadow-destroying light that Gwyn has made mention of. But the others have far less and so they are ours for the taking. I have no love for many of you, but you want to see a new Unseelie Court as much as I do. You may believe that death comes before honour, as disgusting a sentiment as that is. And I may believe that honour is a lie. But you must all see that what August is doing steps far beyond the bounds of both. He has broken both our codes, such as they are.’

Jack watched, unable to look away. The Unseelie fae had a *code*? A code of what? They ate people and destroyed things. And yet, all of the Seelie fae were nodding in agreement, accepting everything Gulvi said without question.

The fae who kept coughing up beetles raised a clawed hand.

‘Jenny Greenteeth, she’s mine.’ He addressed Gwyn, instead of Gulvi.

Suddenly a mass of hands shot up, voices rang out, each claiming members of the Unseelie Court for their own, dividing themselves based on which of the Court they most wanted to see defeated. They might not have been eager to save the children, but they were certainly eager to fight.

Jack looked at the mass of wights around him and then looked at Pitch, who was looking back, just as wide-eyed.

Their expressions seemed to say the same thing:

We didn’t expect this much support.

*

Two hours passed, and Jack had excused himself from one meeting, only to find himself herded into two more. The Seelie Court and allied fae had split into different groups, each discussing their own strategies for dealing with each primary school. Being exposed to smaller groups helped the horrible energy they created within him, but not by much. He was starting to feel irritable, and when addressed directly, he had to concentrate on not being too curt.

Jack found himself in another room, around one of the large rectangular tables that the yeti frequently ate at. He was sectioned off into the group that were confronting August Each Uisge and the Nain Rouge, something that made him wish – even as he cringed from his own cowardice – that he’d never come up with the stupid snowstorm idea so that he could stay as far away from both of them as possible.

The core of the team included Gwyn, Pitch, North and Jack. Bunnymund had insisted on joining them, and Jack suspected he wanted to keep an eye on Pitch. Still, Bunnymund was good with children – especially since he’d met Sophie – and they’d find him a reassuring presence. He and North together would probably be able to convince the children to do anything, even run away from school if their parents weren’t there.

The rest of the fae had hived off to another table, talking about possible allies that August Each Uisge might personally bring with him; Jack was amazed to hear that there were so many different species of waterhorse. He’d had no idea, but to hear the fae behind him casually and speculatively throwing around the names of different species, he started to think he’d never get a full grasp on the world of the fae.

It also made him feel unexpectedly resentful. How, *how* had he managed to spend so many years without being seen by anyone? It was bad enough not being seen by humans, but this was a rich, populated world of spirits. He knew that the fae didn’t entirely live in the human world, occupying an otherworld that Jack himself wasn’t as familiar with, but they crossed over easily enough, he should have been seen by *someone*.

Jack startled out of his private thoughts when he heard Gwyn say:

‘We could go early, leave in an hour. I’m ready. I assume you’d all be ready? No sense in putting this off.’

‘I don’t think that’s wise,’ Pitch said, and all eyes turned to him in shock. Pitch had stayed quiet throughout each of the meetings he’d been involved in, only speaking to answer questions put towards him directly.

‘Go on,’ Gwyn said.

‘Some of you may have noticed that Jack needs rest in order to restore himself to capacity. He has needed more of it as time passes. Knowing him as I do,’ Pitch’s face tightened when Bunnymund didn’t even try and hide his snort of scorn, ‘I would suggest that he be allowed the chance to sleep for at least eight hours before he goes into battle.’

Jack’s heart clenched. Pitch was right. If they wanted him at his strongest, he’d need more sleep. He could tell his energy was already taxed, and he felt a flash of guilt knowing that he’d burnt away even more of it sleeping with Pitch.

‘*At least* eight? He’s a Guardian,’ Bunnymund said, whiskers pushing forward, ‘he doesn’t need that much sleep.’

‘No, Pitch is right,’ Jack said, reluctantly. He avoided Bunnymund’s scrutinising glare and Pitch’s sympathetic expression. He looked down at the table and bit his lip. This wasn’t something he’d wanted to share with *anyone*. ‘I’m getting weaker.’

There was a silence around him, and he didn’t dare look up. He didn’t want to see their mix of expressions. He was hoping that it wouldn’t have been an issue. That by the time they faced the shadows and the Unseelie Court, Jack would have found some kind of loophole and he’d never have to speak of it.

‘I’ve been needing to sleep more and more since the Nain Rouge...did what she did. And I know I can make those storms, but...I’d prefer to have a full tank of energy, that way I can be more helpful.’

‘He has the most charming habit of passing out when he’s pushed past his limits,’ Pitch interjected, with a gentle dryness. ‘Unless you want to be worried about him falling out of the sky, or collapsing like some Victorian maiden in front of the Each Uisge, you have to allow him at least eight hours. Maybe more.’

‘Then you’ll stay here with him,’ Gwyn said to Pitch, and Bunnymund growled deep in the back of his throat. ‘He’s too vulnerable to be left here on his own. I don’t think – with all due respect – any of the Guardians would be strong enough, at this point, to deal with the results if the Unseelie Court decided to deviate from their plan. And we can’t make those snowstorms without him or the golden light. Pitch staying back temporarily may actually help. It may mean we have the element of surprise on our side. We can attack Augus and the Nain Rouge in two waves. The first wave will weaken whatever allies they may have at the school with them, and we will evacuate as many of the children as we can. Second wave will be an assault with the golden light and the snowstorms you both created at the Hunt.’

Jack was surprised at how easily Gwyn had accepted his admission of weakness. He’d thought that – maybe – after the last formal meeting he’d had with Gwyn, he would have gotten angry, or somehow expressed disappointment at Jack’s energy waning.

His gaze drifted sideways, past the displeasure of Bunny, towards North, who was looking straight at him. He looked far more solemn than he normally did.

‘How long have you been growing weaker?’

'I...never really got stronger again,' Jack said, voice small. 'Not like it used to be. I recovered from the attack and then, I don't know. I didn't want to worry anyone. I was hoping that it'd...stabilise or something. And maybe it still will, but it hasn't yet, and it's been a while now. So maybe it won't. It's happening pretty slowly. Mostly I just need to sleep more.'

He looked at Pitch, and Pitch looked back at him, offering something like understanding in his expression. Jack realised Pitch *had* known all along, maybe even earlier than Jack had learned it for himself. Pitch had chosen to say nothing. For someone who pushed all the time, he seemed to be getting better at leaving some things alone.

'I'll be strong enough for this, though,' Jack said, looking back at Gwyn.

'I trust your assessment of your limits,' Gwyn said easily. 'I am just sorry I cannot offer you an answer as to what is happening to you. People do not survive the Nain Rouge's immediate attacks, so there is no one we can speak to who has gone through this process before you. Or if they have survived, it eventually killed them, and they are no longer around to talk to.'

Jack managed to make it look like he hadn't reacted to Gwyn's words, but it was the first time someone else had implied that what Jack was experiencing could be fatal. Jack had...tried not to even think the possibility out loud in his own mind, but now it was laid bare for everyone at the table. If the gap in his soul didn't stabilise, if he didn't find a way to stop the leak, maybe one day he'd just fall asleep and never wake up again.

'You should've told us,' Bunnymund said, and Jack looked up. The words sounded accusatory, but there was a confusion in his eyes, as though Jack had somehow betrayed *him*.

'You heard him clearly, did you not?' Pitch said, annoyance creeping into his tone. 'He did not want to worry anyone.'

'Oh, and I suppose he told you all about it,' Bunnymund said to Pitch. Jack couldn't read him at all anymore. One moment he acted like he didn't want anything to do with Jack at all, the next it was as though he felt entitled to everything going on in Jack's life.

'No. I realised it for myself. I don't know if you are-'

'Okay, so I'll get some sleep,' Jack said, because from the stubborn look on Pitch's face, and the matching expression on Bunnymund's, they were going to escalate into outright fighting if he didn't cut in. 'I'll get some sleep, and then what?'

Gwyn nodded thoughtfully.

'First, before we continue, I'd like to offer the services of my diviner, Ondine. She has offered to read the individual fortunes of those going into battle. Think carefully on whether this is something you would like. It may help to shape the rest of our strategy.'

'Not interested,' Pitch said, a look of open distaste on his face.

'You have a problem with diviners? I didn't expect that,' Gwyn said lightly, and Pitch shook his head as though trying to clear a sour taste from his mouth.

'Where I come from, divining is...taboo.'

'Well, where I come from, it's a handy way of knowing one's odds. But I won't force you,' Gwyn said, and then excused himself from the table.

'I have to check on the others. If you're interested in the divining, Ondine is back in the round table room.'

Jack stood hurriedly, not wanting to get caught in some kind of conversation with North where he'd feel like he had to defend himself for not being honest. He remembered how North had been so upset knowing that Jack dealt with so many things on his own, but Jack couldn't change overnight. He couldn't handle a lecture, and he didn't even know if he could handle North telling him that it was okay, or *understandable*.

He felt like Pitch had ripped back his skin and showed the awful truth of him. He was getting *weaker*. It wasn't something that could be fixed by the beliefs of children, it wasn't something that could be healed with golden light. It wasn't even something he would necessarily survive.

He flew away from them, outpacing Gwyn and swooping down towards the round table room. He hadn't decided yet if he wanted Ondine to divine his future, but at least it looked like he was doing something that had purpose.

He saw Gulvi off to the side, alone and standing, looking around the workshop, face unreadable. She had one hand on one of the bare daggers. They weren't even sheathed. He wondered if she ever cut herself on them.

She was Unseelie. She intrigued him.

He headed over to her and landed lightly by her side. She didn't look at him, but he could tell she knew he was there.

'Shouldn't you be...discussing strategy or something?'

'*Quoi!* Do not act so surprised. Swans do not like meetings, and nor do frostlings. I have done my part.'

'The part where you betray the Unseelie Court?' Jack said. He had thought he was angry at her, but as soon as he asked the question, he realised he wasn't. It was so clear standing next to her, that there was nothing human about her; that there never had been. He wasn't talking to a human who had been raised with social mores and constructs that were a part of a human society. He was talking with a swan maiden, he didn't know the first thing about how she'd been raised.

'Ah, no, how unfairly you judge me,' Gulvi said, but with a mischievous glint in her eye. 'Well! If you must know, I have changed allegiance more times than I have gutted someone with my blades. And you can imagine how many times I have done that, no?' She laughed deep in her throat, a rich, fulsome sound.

'I am angry at my dear friend, Ash. The Glashtyn,' Gulvi qualified, and Jack frowned. 'He is August's younger brother, and they have ever loved each other dearly, as brothers should. But unlike August, he is generous, compassionate. He can be strong, lovely, playful. When August took up with the shadows, I had half-hoped that the Glashtyn would split from his brother and that repulsive Court, but instead he has wilted and shown cowardice. I do not care for children, nor do I care for the Seelie Court or their fae, nor do I even care for August and his Court. But I do wish that Ash would see reason. And if he will not see reason, then I will stab him until he does.'

She said it so simply, that Jack almost thought everything she'd said made perfect sense, until he ran her words back through his head.

'You'd kill him?' Jack said.

Gulvi laughed outright, and then passed a webbed hand over her face, shaking her head in disbelief.

‘Oh, what a sweetheart you are. Darling, we are fae. We do not *die* as humans die. Is that what you think? That you shall kill the Nain Rouge? Slaughter the vengeful August? You may divert their attentions for a while. You may even harm them. But la, those of us who are higher up in the ranks are terribly hard to kill. We respond better to shows of power. We may not die, but it is painful to be tormented; best to avoid it, no?’

Jack nodded, and then tore his eyes away from hers. His skin was not as prickly now that he was no longer in close quarters with so many of the fae at once, but he still felt it, especially after prolonged eye contact. The power passed over him and through him. He tried to rub it off his hand and then stopped, abashed, hoping no one had noticed.

Gulvi noticed.

‘It is because you were human once,’ she said, something strangely soft in her voice. ‘That is why it pains you. It is because you were human once, and it is because you are still so very young. Honestly, it is charming. But be careful, little one. We do like a lovely pawn.’

Jack flinched when he felt claws slide down the side of his face. He stepped backwards and glared at her. He saw an alien expression in her eyes, something dark and hungry, cheerful and adoring. She looked at Jack as though he were a prize turkey, wondering how much meat was on his bones, how much longer she’d have to wait before hurting him.

‘Stop messing with me,’ he said, and she shook her wings and they resettled behind her.

‘I *like* messes,’ Gulvi replied. ‘Maybe I knew what the Unseelie Court were planning weeks ago. *Maybe*,’ she said, arching one wicked brow, ‘I *wanted* to leave things until the last minute. Chaos is a much better bouquet to sup upon, is it not?’

‘Is that true?’ Jack breathed, ‘Did you know?’

‘Are you *angry* with me?’ Gulvi said, delighted. ‘Well! Did you-’

‘Children are involved!’ Jack shouted, and his skin crawled when several conversations that had been buzzing quietly behind him ceased, and he felt the weight of fae looking at him. ‘What is *wrong* with you?’

Gulvi only smiled, something dangerous in the black glint of her eyes.

‘Frostling, perhaps I know even more than I have shared, yes? What other sweetmeats of information am I holding back?’

Jack wanted to attack her, wanted to swing his staff and direct frost at her, but he restrained himself. He knew he’d need all of his energy to make the snowstorms, to defend himself, to protect others, if he could.

Gulvi laughed gently and Jack jerked backwards when she went to rest a clawed finger under his chin.

‘How are you a swan? You’re not like any swan I’ve ever met,’ Jack said, and Gulvi raised her eyebrows.

‘How are you a frostling? You are not at all cold-hearted. What fire you have in that heart of yours.’

I'd envy you, if I thought it were worth my time.'

She turned to walk away. *Oh no you don't.* Jack hooked his staff around her leg, tugging her back. She whirled, wings flared, a dagger free and in her hand before he could track her movements. She glared. Jack felt a quick pulse of fear, but he stamped on it hard.

'Is it true? What else aren't you telling us?' he said, surprised at how angry he sounded. He had a swan maiden who looked positively lethal staring at him like she'd enjoy nothing more than gutting him, and he still couldn't bear the idea of letting her go without finding out if she was playing him.

'What is this?' Gwyn shouted angrily, and Gulvi and Jack both straightened reluctantly from their fighting stances. Gulvi put her dagger away, and Jack straightened his staff. When he turned, he was surprised to see Pitch, North and Bunnymund there as well. Pitch was staring at Jack with wide eyes.

'We don't have time for this!' Gwyn said, and Jack snarled, feeling the weight of the fae looking at him, that horrible caustic energy abrading his skin, turning him wild. He pointed at Gulvi with his staff, and she responded by withdrawing her dagger and tossing it from hand to hand, as though she'd like nothing more than to throw it.

'She says she knows more about what Augus has planned than she's letting on.'

Gwyn looked at Gulvi with disgust.

'I know,' he said, and Gulvi chuckled. 'I know she does.'

'You don't miss a thing,' she said, returning her dagger to her waist and smiling at Jack with a mix of fondness and cruelty. 'I was just playing, little thing.'

'Well *don't*,' Gwyn ground out. 'Play your games later, Gulvi. If you want to help the Glashtyn, maybe you should put your impulses aside and stop acting so bird-brained. And you, Jack, shouldn't you be conserving your energy? Go see Ondine, if that is what you wish, and then sleep.'

Jack bristled. *There's the bossy Gwyn I find so annoying.*

'Pawn,' Gulvi taunted, and Jack bit his tongue so hard he tasted blood.

If he could just get away from all of these stupid fae, maybe he could *concentrate*. His fingernails ached where he dug them into the staff. How was he supposed to sleep when all he could feel was his skin too tight for his own body? Tension galloped up and down his spine.

'Leave him alone.' Ondine pushed through the crowd that had gathered around them. 'Can't you idiots see he's affected by the gramarye? Come on, you.'

She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him through the crowd, wet fingers somehow not slipping on his skin. He followed her, his mind buzzed with something like static, and more than once he stumbled.

The further away he was from the fae, the more he felt like himself again. He took deep breaths, tried to quell whatever was racing inside him.

Ondine drew him into the round table room, past the line of fae waiting for their personal fortunes. Jack was relieved to see that they were alone. She didn't let go of his arm until they were at the opposite end of the room, a trail of water behind them. Ondine made water wherever she went.

‘Gulvi’s a bitch. But she’s a necessary bitch,’ Ondine said, sighing. She rolled her almost black eyes. She pressed dripping olive-skinned fingers to Jack’s forehead and pressed hard. The sensation made Jack blink and stare at her, and his attention snapped back into place like a rubber band.

‘There,’ she said.

‘Gulvi knew,’ Jack said. ‘Gulvi knew I was affected by the...gramarye?’

‘Gramarye, dra’ocht, whatever you want to call it. And of course she did,’ Ondine said with disgust, flipping wet, curly hair back from her face and spraying Jack with droplets accidentally. ‘Gulvi likes toys, so you know, a word of advice; don’t become one.’

Jack sat down weakly on a free stool, and Ondine sat opposite him, taking his hands into her wet ones. She smiled. There was a genuine sweetness there. Jack liked Ondine, he thought that perhaps one day they could be friends. She seemed far less attached to the etiquette and formalities that some of the other fae observed.

‘We’re here now. Might as well divine for you,’ she said, her eyes flicking sideways as her attention was caught. Pitch had entered the room, Gwyn behind him. Pitch looked worried, and Gwyn simply looked like someone who had spent far too many hours trying to herd a group of very uncooperative cats.

‘I’ll send them out,’ Ondine said. ‘You have a right to privacy.’

‘No, it’s...they can stay,’ Jack said quietly. Pitch’s presence was soothing, and he was getting used to Gwyn’s energy.

‘Great, because I didn’t fancy telling the King of the Seelie Fae to get lost. Can you imagine?’ Her fingers squeezed his, and water ran between them. ‘Anyway, it’ll be nice to read for you, frost-boy. You’re a cutie.’

‘Will it hurt?’ Jack said, without thinking, and Ondine shook her head.

‘You won’t feel a thing.’

She closed her eyes and her grip around his hands loosened as she relaxed. She took deep, measured breaths, and the water dripping between his fingers turned into trickles and then rivulets. He could smell ozone around her. He wondered where all the water came from.

Ondine’s eyes flew open and she yanked her hands back from Jack’s and stood up, looking over at Gwyn.

‘What?’ Jack said, frightened.

‘Just one moment, Jack. Honest. I’ll be right back.’ She flashed him a quick smile that was supposed to be calming. It was anything but.

She walked hurriedly around the great round table and then beckoned Gwyn to join her. Pitch stayed still, looking between Jack and then Ondine with alarm. Jack stared down at his own hands, as though he could see his fortune written there. *What had she seen?*

She and Gwyn whispered amongst each other for a little while, and then she nodded at something Gwyn said and came back to Jack. She smiled apologetically at him and took his hands back in hers, squeezing them in reassurance.

‘Just...for the record,’ Jack said, shakily, ‘When you get up and go to Gwyn and talk to him about my fortune first, it’s *really* freaky.’

‘Yeah, I’m sorry. Honest. Look, I’m going to give you a choice. Okay? I don’t usually give people a second chance to avoid the truth, but I suppose you never really gave me clear consent the first time. So, do you want to know? Or should we just leave it here?’

Jack stared at her.

‘If you think I’m walking away after *that*...’

Ondine smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

‘Alright. You will make your own fate, Jack. But before you do, I see...dark times ahead of you. I was surprised, because many of the other fae are getting positive outcomes. But what I see for you is confusing. It is all in shadow. A darkness is cast over your path. One moment, I see your path, and it is clear and then the next. Shadows. Does that make any sense to you?’

Shadows.

Jack made a sound in his throat and tugged his hands back, staring at her.

‘But,’ he said, ‘you show like, one pathway of many, right? And if I did something differently, then maybe...’

‘Jack, love, I am not some tarot reader. I am not some fortune teller. I do not show you a multitude of paths. I show you *the* path. One.’

‘What else?’ he whispered. ‘What else do you see?’

‘As I said, I think you make your own fate, Jack. Sometimes, when I look at someone’s path, and it’s very foretold, I see all the way right through to the end. For you? I do not see past tomorrow. Normally that means the last day, you know – death – but I know that’s not what I’m seeing here. I think I’d only ever see to the end of tomorrow for you. It’s hard to explain, and being a diviner all my life hasn’t made it any easier when I get a cryptic future like yours. Gwyn’s path through life is much the same. He’s never been easy to read.’

‘What do you mean by shadows?’ Jack said, and Ondine frowned.

‘Give me your hands again? Please?’

Jack offered them back and tensed his forearms when he realised they were shaking. He looked over at Pitch, wondering if Pitch had sensed his fear, if Pitch *knew* what he was frightened of. Pitch was staring at him, but his face was schooled to stillness.

Ondine shook her head after a few seconds.

‘No, I’m sorry, Jack. I wish I had more for you, but I don’t. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, either. It looks bad, but shadows can mean a lot of things. Don’t assume the worst, okay? This is just the way it goes, sometimes.’

She withdrew her own hands and Jack stood up, shaking water off his palms.

‘Thank you,’ he said, automatically, and she winced.

He looked up at Gwyn as he walked past him. Gwyn watched with a stern, considering look on his

face. He wondered what Gwyn thought of his fortune, if that would change their strategy at all. He was still looking at Gwyn when he reached Pitch, and only managed to blink away when he felt a warm hand on his shoulder.

'I don't think I need to tell you how stupid I think it was that you did this,' Pitch said, and Jack couldn't even make eye contact.

Pitch sighed.

'I don't think you should be down here with all of the fae.'

'I'll be go up to my room. I'm meant to be sleeping anyway,' Jack said absently, and then floated off and up through the Workshop, feeling the imprint of Pitch's hand on his shoulder like a brand.

Shadows.

Jack didn't want to know.

*

He didn't go to his room.

Sandy was sleeping on a fluffy sand-cloud, the contained swirl of might-one-day-be-Mora spun in an invisible wind beside him. Jack pressed fingers into his eyes to head off the tears. He missed Mora *so* badly. She wouldn't have put up with the fae bullying him. She would have offered her silent support; her leaning flank, her head-butts, even the way she would lip his sweatshirt when she wanted him to pay more attention to her and his surroundings.

He quietly landed upon the cloud, not wanting to rouse Sandy. He pressed his back against a puffy rise of golden sand and folded his arms under his head, staring sadly at Mora. He couldn't sleep, didn't know how he was ever going to sleep. Why did he ever think getting his future divined might be a good idea? When would Ondine ever have seen something good in his future? If he had asked her months ago, would she have seen Jamie and the Nain Rouge? Would she have seen Mora disintegrating into the dreamsand?

Sandy rolled over and then blinked awake slowly, smiling when he saw Jack.

'No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you,' Jack said, automatically, and Sandy shook his head. He walked over and sat by Jack, placing a light arm over Jack's hair, letting his hand rest over Jack's forehead. Then he leaned back as the cloud reshaped around them, and Jack felt Sandy's body expand and contract on a sigh. He seemed happy that Jack was there, not upset.

'Will you be fighting in the battle?' Jack asked, and tilted his head to see what symbols Sandy made. Sandy nodded slowly, and then raised a finger to his lips, the universal sign for, *Shut up, Jack.*

Sandy's other hand started stroking the side of Jack's face lightly, soothingly. Jack shivered, pulled his staff closer to his body. He didn't feel safe with all of the fae still in the Workshop. He didn't trust Gulvi, he knew hardly any of the others. Even Albion, one of the few of the Seelie Court he liked, hadn't been there; fighting his own war to claim back deltas and inlets that Augus had gotten claimed for himself. And it was obvious that Gwyn thought of Jack as nothing more than someone with a useful power. They weren't friends.

Sandy started tracing spirals and other patterns into the side of Jack's face, and Jack wanted to ask a thousand questions. Before he had the chance, Sandy blew dreamsand across his face, and his

body relaxed into sleep.

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When he woke up, he was in Pitch's bed. He felt rested, but he didn't feel relaxed. He wondered if he'd had good dreams; he couldn't remember a single one. Light streamed in through the window, and Pitch was lying alongside him. He stared up at the ceiling, wide awake.

'How long did I sleep?' Jack said, hoping he still had hours ahead of him.

'Fourteen hours. Everyone has left.'

'*Fourteen?*' Jack exclaimed, anxiety winging through him. He pushed himself upright, only to find a heavy arm wrapping around him and pulling him close. 'We have to leave.'

'I know,' Pitch said, though he didn't look away from the ceiling.

Jack slumped onto Pitch's body, feeling dazed with what they were about to do. He didn't want to teleport through darkness to defend a primary school. He didn't want to be anywhere near the Nain Rouge or Augus Each Uisge. He didn't want Ondine's prophecy to be true. Why couldn't she just have told him that everything would work out fine? Some vague divining about shadows was the *last* thing he needed.

Pitch moved his hand down the centre of Jack's spine in a caress, and Jack pressed his face into Pitch's neck, breathing deep. Everything about Pitch was always warm, always welcoming. Even now, with Pitch distracted and staring up at the ceiling, it was good to be near him. He tried to get closer, but his full weight already rested on Pitch's body. He pushed his nose against the underside of Pitch's jaw, rubbed his cheek against his cheek. Unbidden, he felt his body begin to stir.

'One last time,' he breathed. 'Just in case anything happens to us, just one last time. In case this is it.'

'The things you say make me want to *murder* you,' Pitch said, a hint of anger touching his voice.

'But, Pitch,' Jack breathed against his skin, pressing his lips to Pitch's neck, burrowing fingers in his hair. He let his legs drop either side of Pitch's torso. He wanted to be so close he disappeared.

'No, Jack.'

Jack pressed his chest down harder, until he felt Pitch's heart beating through their clothing. He squeezed his eyes shut.

'Please,' Jack whispered.

'No,' Pitch said, though he stroked Jack's back again, and then raised his other hand and joined it. The motions were slow and soothing, not designed to be seductive. Pitch was offering him comfort. Jack, frustrated, bit the side of Pitch's neck, and Pitch's hands didn't still in their movements.

'Stop this,' Pitch said, quietly.

'But-'

'It will drain you,' Pitch said. 'You will not go into that battle anything other than hale and fit, do you understand?'

'*Pitch*,' Jack hissed, and Pitch shook his head resolutely, still looking up at the ceiling. Jack wanted

to bang his head against a wall. He wasn't even really turned on. But if this was going to be their last time, which it probably was... he couldn't bear the thought of not taking advantage of this moment. He wanted to hold back the reality of the battle a little longer.

'Focus on the children,' Pitch said, and Jack's throat closed up. Pitch's hands on his back became arms wrapped around him, squeezing him closer, holding him tight. They responded to the pain that ratcheted through him.

'What if...' *I don't see you again? What if the Nain Rouge gets to one of us?*

'I love you, Jack,' Pitch whispered.

The arms around him tightened as Jack pushed up to leave. He couldn't handle this. Couldn't handle this gentle moment that Pitch wanted to have. He wanted the mindlessness of sex, and Pitch wasn't playing fair. He didn't want to have to *think*. He didn't want words that would just remind him of everything they were about to do.

He struggled weakly, wanting to run from reality, and Pitch's arms around him were strong and firm, holding him close, drawing him back. Jack slumped down, his body shuddering with sobs that he didn't want to give voice to. His face was wet.

'This won't be the last time we have together,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head in denial. Pitch didn't understand, he couldn't understand. 'I don't plan on leaving your side. I am not going anywhere.'

Jack's tears soaked Pitch's robe, and his hands clenched hard at Pitch's hair, and Pitch didn't even seem to notice. His arms were heavy, anchoring bands around him, forcing him into a reality he didn't want to be a part of. He couldn't do it. He couldn't face what everyone was facing. He wasn't strong enough. The Nain Rouge would be there. August would be there. Everyone was expecting things from him.

'The children, Jack,' Pitch reminded him and Jack's heart tore open.

'Stop it,' Jack said, but his voice was so thick, his throat so painful, that he could barely force the words out. Pitch's head shifted, Jack felt lips brush against the top of his head.

'I'm sorry,' Pitch said, as though he were apologising for everything that Jack had ever experienced. There was far more in those two words than Jack thought possible.

'Why aren't you telling me it's going to be okay?' Jack said, and then he remembered. 'Oh, right. That would be a platitude.'

'I don't do platitudes,' Pitch said, quietly. 'That's why you can trust me, when I tell you I'm not going anywhere. And it's why you can believe me, when I tell you that I love you.'

I don't believe you. Jack hid his face in the shadows near Pitch's neck. Pitch deserved someone who could accept Pitch's love for the gift that it was, not someone who was in constant denial. Not someone who expected everything good to disappear at a moment's notice. He couldn't even say it back. He didn't even know how to mean it, he didn't even know if what he felt was love. Pitch deserved better.

'Stop that,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

'I do not say it with expectation. *I know* you. I don't care if you can't say it. I don't care if you don't feel it. It is a declaration of my feelings, not an obligation that you must answer.'

Jack swallowed, heart beating hard. He hadn't expected that. Didn't one person say 'I love you,' and didn't the other person always say it back? Wasn't that the way it went? That was what Jamie and Wesley used to say to each other. It was what teenagers often said to each other when they were warm in their cars, making out on the back seat, hidden by falling snow. He looked up at Pitch, who offered him a weak smile.

'It wouldn't be love if I didn't accept you; the bundle of fears that you are.'

Jack stroked Pitch's face with his fingers, dropped his head so he could bury it into shoulder and robe and neck. He was almost certain he didn't deserve acceptance.

'I want you to listen to me, Jack,' Pitch said, using his name in that way that plucked at his attention, demanded his focus. 'I don't want you anywhere near August. If you see him, *leave*. And if you're in earshot, block your ears. All that fear you have inside of you; point it in his direction. Please. He is more dangerous to you than you could possibly conceive.'

'Okay,' Jack said, muffled. He hoped Pitch was just being paranoid, he suspected that he wasn't.

'You are not nearly scared enough of August, and that bothers me.'

'Now would be a great time to remind you that you know, you and he were *together*. It's hard to take him seriously, sometimes. I mean, yeah, he's scary. But...'

'The Nain Rouge will kill you quickly,' Pitch said, his voice catching, 'but August will *not*.'

Jack stilled, his fingers went limp in Pitch's hair. He raised up and looked down at Pitch, a new thread of fear twining through him.

'Are you *trying* to scare me?' Jack said, and Pitch's lips thinned. Then he nodded.

'Do you know how not helpful that is?' Jack said, and Pitch's arms tightened reflexively around him.

'Fear is important, Jack. Fear is what will keep you alive.'

'You won't sleep with me, and now you're trying to make me afraid. It's a good thing I like you, because sometimes you are very strange.' Jack pressed his lips lightly to Pitch's. They lingered, and Jack was finding it harder and harder to push reality away. Pitch had him anchored firmly in the present, and that was a present where he'd slept for fourteen hours, where he needed to use that energy for a purpose. When he leaned back, Pitch withdrew his arms and Jack got off the bed, feeling the warmth of Pitch's lips against his, how sweet it had been.

'So what now?' Jack was surprised to see that Pitch was already fully dressed. He just needed to sling his sword onto his back and adjust the leather strap. He wondered how long Pitch had lain next to him, dressed and ready for battle, waiting for Jack to wake up.

'Now we travel through the shadows, and see what awaits us on the other side.'

Jack felt a wave of nausea move all the way through his torso until it got stuck up in his throat. He swallowed hard.

Focus on the children, he reminded himself. His mind, unexpectedly, wandered straight to Jamie as he had been as a child. His heart flared with a shadow of the fire that Jamie's belief had evoked in him. He could do this, he realised. He could do this if he thought of the children, if he thought that Jamie was in that school, needing his help.

‘Okay,’ Jack said. ‘Okay. So I’m going to be thinking about the children. That’ll help. What about you though? What’ll help you?’

Jack expected for Pitch to mention his daughter, but instead Pitch offered Jack a small smile, a precious tenderness, and Jack’s chest tightened and he felt a fluttering in his chest.

Oh, he thought.

Pitch reached into his robe and brought out the locket, gazed at it. He traced it with a single finger and his jaw tightened. Jack closed the distance between them, touched Pitch’s hand with his own, reluctant to touch the locket directly. It was invaluable, Jack knew he couldn’t begin to fathom how much it meant to Pitch. Pitch held it like a living object, as if he could somehow cradle his child again if he only bestowed enough care and attention to the locket itself.

After a few minutes, he put the locket back in the inside pocket of his robe, and drew Jack close to him.

Jack thought Pitch would say something. He thought there would be some final thing they would share between them. But instead, Pitch’s arms tightened, Jack gripped his staff tightly, and they raced through the darkness towards the unknown.

Into Shadows We Fall

Chapter Notes

The final chapter of From the Darkness We Rise. Can you believe it? We're finally here. It's hard to believe.

A final, tremendous THANK YOU to everyone who has read this, who has re-read it, who have sent me asks on Tumblr, who have done the most amazing fanart, who have given this story kudos or commented or subscribed or bookmarked.

I look forward to seeing you for the sequel. *grins*

Content Warning for This Chapter: blood and gore, violence against children, hostage situation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Everything was chaos.

Jack saw the scene around him in static snapshots. He saw August standing, nonchalant, a rapier hanging loose in his right hand, behind a huge number of Nightmares. Most the Nightmares were being held in check by a number of waterhorses in both human and horse form, as well as Gwyn, who was making the golden light and herding the Nightmares back. He heard the screams of fae and children both, the sounds of the wounded, the afraid. He saw a huge dome of strange, green energy around the whole school and adult humans waiting beyond it, unable to get through the magic. He saw North coaxing a child through the green magic to panicked parents, and other children standing near him, crying and distressed. He saw Gwyn's soldiers fighting malicious Unseelie fae with swords and in hand to hand combat. He saw bodies on the ground. Blood.

One of Gwyn's soldiers ran up to them, and Jack realised belatedly that Pitch had a hand on Jack's lower back, as if he didn't want to stop being physically connected to him.

'The Nain Rouge has children hostage inside the gymnasium, Sir. Bunnymund has managed to get a good lot of them free, but he's been wounded and evacuations have slowed down significantly. Get as much storm activity up as you can, Gwyn said. And then Pitch, you're to go help Gwyn directly, and Jack's on aerial surveillance or down with North, helping to evacuate the children.'

'The Nain Rouge?' Pitch said, eyes straying over to August.

'Gwyn will decide once the storms are made and he sees how they affect the Nightmares,' the soldier said. He nodded his head in acknowledgement, and ran past them to intercept a charging Unseelie fae.

Jack's hand clenched around his staff.

'Bunnymund...' he said, and Pitch rubbed his hand briefly up and down Jack's back.

'If I see him, and the wound is treatable, I'll heal him,' Pitch said. 'First we must make these storms.'

Jack and Pitch shared a glance, a brief moment of stillness, and then Jack shot up into the air and Pitch withdrew his heavy sword with a single, easy movement.

Pitch sent huge, powerful waves of golden light up into the air, and Jack seeded each one with snow and cold, thinking of huge snowstorms, of cumulonimbus, of clouds so fat and heavy with snow that they had to let go of it immediately.

Above them, the atmosphere thickened. Humidity grew and the barometric pressure altered around everyone. Air grew heavy with clouds that whipped themselves up too fast to be anything other than Jack's supernatural magic. Every single one glowed golden from within, and every single one started releasing the glittering pieces of snow before they were fully formed.

Jack flew up through the air, directing the clouds over the Nightmares with the wind he called to himself. He couldn't look at the Nightmares too closely. They reminded him too much of Mora. And when the first Nightmares started shrieking as the golden snow began to fall on them, Jack briefly closed his eyes.

They're not Mora. They're not Mora.

He ducked down through the cloud cover. Through the flurries of glowing snow, he saw Nightmares fleeing beneath it, loathing the golden light as completely as Mora had, finding it unbearable. Some of the waterhorses were driving the Nightmares back towards it. The fighting had slowed down, a few Unseelie fae who hadn't seen the snow before were distracted by it.

August Each Uisge had his rapier in a firm, expert grip and looked directly up at Jack, face grim. He didn't look like he'd known about the snow merged with the golden light. He didn't look happy.

Jack felt a pull somewhere behind his navel, a feeling like he needed to get down to August, that it was important he fly down and meet with him. Jack gasped and turned, fled back into the safety of the clouds where he couldn't make eye contact. He was up in the sky, a fair distance away, and he'd *still* felt August's compulsion. All of Pitch's warnings came back to him and he curled up briefly under cloud-cover where no one could see him. He gasped a breath into his lungs, tried to pull himself together. Why was August so obsessed with him? Did Pitch *know* something about him, that Jack didn't know? The Nain Rouge was the one who had done the most damage to him, and yet August seemed to want to target him personally.

He startled when one of the Nightmares flew up into the cumulus where he was hiding, screaming as the snow touched it, eyes wild and mouth open in a combination of terror and fury. And on the Nightmare's back, August Each Uisge sat, rapier at the ready, wearing calf-high boots, a button-up dark green shirt. His amused, cruel eyes sought Jack out.

Jack flew backwards automatically, fear turning him quiet and making him want to disappear. He couldn't get the Nightmare's awful shrieking out of ears, the Each Uisge was forcing it into an environment that might kill it. He wanted to feel sorry for the Nightmare, but he thought he could use its vulnerability to his advantage. He flew behind a barrier of clouds, calling a wind up, making sure it raced past his ears, blocking out sound before it could reach him. He was *sure* August was using his compulsion, but if the wind didn't let the words reach his ears and he wasn't making eye contact, maybe he'd be okay.

He created a funnel of the golden snow, and then sent it directly at the Nightmare, sensing its presence in the clouds. Stealth wasn't something he often had to rely on, but he could use it well enough when he had to.

Jack poked his head through his protective cover of cloud quickly. He saw the Nightmare's head flung back, a terrible glowing wound in its flank. August hit the creature with the flat of his rapier, stared at Jack with a cold rage, but the Nightmare's wound was fatal. Gold spread tendrils all over it, and it dissolved into sand, August falling with it.

Jack didn't pause to see how August landed or what had happened. He was fae, a *King*, he wouldn't die from a fall like that. Instead, Jack shot around to the opposite side of the battle, as far away from August as he could get. He'd made the snow, there wasn't much more he could fit into the sky, and he was depleting his powers.

He skidded to a halt by North, who was standing with children by the edge of the dome, flanked by Gwyn's soldiers. North was trying his hardest to convince a child that he would be okay, that it was perfectly safe to move through the barrier of the dome. The child was having none of it.

'*Jack*,' North said in relief, when he saw him.

'Do you want some help?'

Jack realised with a frown that most of the children couldn't see him. It didn't surprise him, he wasn't like North and the others, who had good traction with the majority of children. He didn't have many followers, but the ones he did have were loyal.

There were about twenty children around North. Most were crying. Some out loud, some weakly, some with the exhaustion that came from having cried for hours and not having anything left except the occasional tremor and silent tears. There were a couple of children still attempting to be stoic. Jack tensed when he saw four of them just standing there, numb and unresponsive.

If I was a kid, taken hostage by the Nain Rouge, I'd probably feel the same way.

'I can help,' Jack said, with a brief smile. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no sign of August anywhere, and he couldn't feel that horrible compulsion in his body anymore.

It didn't matter if the kids recognised him or not, he didn't need to be seen in order to make sure they could find themselves again. He waved his staff and called a mound of snow to him. It sparkled and gleamed, drawing the attention of some of the children.

'Pretty, huh?' he said to them, and one child's eyes flickered over to his and made direct contact. He beamed at her.

A believer, awesome. This'll be a piece of cake. I can do this.

'This is a really special kind of snow,' Jack said, as he started to make snowballs, blowing on each of them and laying them in a growing pile at his feet. North watched him with a mix of gratitude and fatigue. 'It's awesome. Not only is it snow, which is already the greatest. But it's a snow filled with a magical light. And it's gonna make sure you guys get home safely. And you'd like that, yeah?'

The one child who was looking directly at him, nodded. She'd been wearing pigtails, but one of the hair ties had gone missing. Her uniform was rumpled. She looked tired.

'Yeah, me too. That's why I'm here. To help you guys out.'

He picked up several of the snowballs and took a deep breath. He grinned at the child, and then threw the snowball gently. It landed against the two hands she held fisted up at her neck and shattered, releasing a glow of light and fragments of snow. She opened her mouth in surprise, and

then wonder. As the other children shrieked in fear at the snowball attack (and North rushed to reassure them), her mouth broke into a hesitant smile.

‘That’s it,’ Jack said, nodding encouragingly. ‘You’re doing so great!’

He threw a few more of the snowballs even as North tried to tell the kids that they wouldn’t hurt, they wouldn’t do any harm. *These kids are paranoid, and with good reason.* He held onto his smile, held onto the snowballs. He could feel the golden light inside of them, a strange warmth that didn’t melt the snow.

The kids were slow to respond. The snowballs were working, but these were kids who had been terrified for hours and hours, not kids who were just having a bad afternoon, or a bad morning. Shaking them free from trauma would take more than a few snowballs, and he hated that he knew that, that he couldn’t help all of them individually and make everything okay again.

The child who he’d hit first, the little girl, she ran up to him and picked up some of the snowballs herself, and started throwing them at the kids nearby.

‘It’s good snow, you guys!’ she shouted. ‘It’ll make you feel good!’

Jack started making more snowballs, blowing on each of them, unable to stop himself from smiling.

As the children started to feel more confidence, as they started to acknowledge the feelings of goodness growing inside of them, several broke out into hesitant, warm smiles. North took those ones right up to the edge of the magical dome and pointed through it, showing parents and police officers, firefighters and ambulances waiting nearby. A few of the children still hesitated, but some ran straight through, pelting like mad towards loved ones or the uniformed authority figures waiting to help.

Jack was throwing more of the snowballs when he felt a tug on his sweatshirt. He looked down and saw the girl smiling up at him. He knelt in front of her, so that they were on a level. She couldn’t have been more than about eight.

‘Hey, you feeling a bit better?’ he said, and she nodded. She held two snowballs in her hands, and there were still signs of dried tears on her face.

‘You’re Jack Frost, aren’t you?’ she whispered, and he smiled wider. He couldn’t help it. He was worried about Pitch, worried about Bunnymund, worried about the children, and yet he would never get over the power that children had to make him feel grounded.

‘Sure am,’ he nodded.

‘You should take that snow to the kids still inside,’ she whispered, as North continued to help shuffle kids through the magical barrier that was keeping the humans out.

‘There are lots of kids still inside, huh?’ Jack said and she frowned briefly.

‘Not lots, but it’s not safe.’ She leaned in close, and Jack leaned in as well, so that she could whisper in his ear. ‘There’s a scary monster kid in there,’ the girl. ‘She hurt the Easter Bunny. And she ate a kid.’

She ate a kid. Jack’s breath escaped him, he wasn’t even able to hold onto a reassuring smile. When he drew back, the girl was looking at him sadly.

'Stacey,' the girl said, her voice hitching over the name.

'Stacey. Was she your friend?' Jack said, and the girl paused, then nodded. She looked soberly down at the snow she held in her hands.

'Some of the kids are too scared to leave, because they don't want to be eaten, and they don't want to make the scary monster kid mad. She has *guns* too. You should take the snow in to them, and maybe they'll run away. Because it'll make them feel good.'

Oh god.

'Did you tell Nor- I mean, Santa, about this?'

The girl shook her head, looking over at North and then looking down at the snowballs in her hand. She seemed to gain a margin of strength every time she reminded herself that they were there. She made eye contact with Jack, and Jack thought he understood. Santa was wonderful, and he brought toys, but he was still huge and intimidating, and these kids had been through enough intimidating to last them several lifetimes.

Jack made more of the snowballs automatically, because if his plan worked out, North was going to need them.

'What's your name?' Jack said, to the young girl.

'Patty,' she said. Jack nodded, found a smile for her.

'You should go through the dome, Patty,' he said. 'I know it looks scary, but it won't hurt you. It looks like it keeps people out, but it doesn't keep you in. And you've got people who are worried about you. You don't have to stay in here anymore.'

'You'll help the rest of the kids?' Patty said, and Jack nodded.

'That's why I'm here,' he said, 'It's the *only* reason I'm here. Okay? So will you go through that dome for me? Get out of here? The sooner you're out of here, the sooner I can bring you a snow day or come visit, and make sure everything's alright.'

He made his voice as light and reassuring as possible, but he felt rage deep inside of him. The Nain Rouge had *eaten* a child. It wasn't enough that she consumed every stupid power and soul around her, but she had to go and eat an innocent kid as well? He hated the Nain Rouge, he burned with it. It turned him brittle and caustic on the inside. It left him with a dark, murderous feeling that hadn't welled inside of him for a very long time. He'd encountered monsters before – human monsters – and he wasn't bound by human law. He wanted the Nain Rouge dead, and he wanted to be there when it happened.

He thought Patty would need more convincing to leave, but she turned around and started sprinting towards the dome, holding the snowballs in her hands like talismans. Jack felt a brief wash of relief when she made it through safely. And then he was surprised to see that none of the children were remaining, all had made it through. He continued to make snowballs, one after the other, blowing on each one.

'You have to stay out here,' Jack said to North, voice shaking with renewed anger as he thought of the Nain Rouge. 'I'm gonna get Pitch and maybe Gwyn, and we'll see if we can't heal Bunny and get the rest of the children out. I'm leaving you all of these, okay? They'll work even if I'm not the one throwing them.'

North nodded and Jack frowned.

‘How bad is Bunnymund?’

North shook his head sadly.

‘He was shot twice. His leg is very wounded. He’s inside with some of Gwyn’s soldiers. He’ll be alright, but the children can’t see him like that. They are scared enough of the Nain Rouge. And I think I am just too big and scary-looking to be convincing them to come out. Even if I am Santa.’ North ran a hand over his face, tugged at his beard. He looked worn. There was a terrible weight behind the brightness of his eyes.

‘You’re just what they need,’ Jack reassured him, ‘Especially once you hit them with a few of these snowballs. If you run out of them, just rub the snow on their skin, or tell them to do it. The snow has Pitch’s light in it, and the light makes you feel confident. It doesn’t make them feel as good as the snowballs, but it might be just enough to get them to run through that stupid magical dome. Okay? There’s going to be tons of the snow falling. We’re not going to run out any time soon.’

On a whim, Jack threw one of the snowballs at North, and hit him in the side of the head. North’s eyes widened, and then he laughed, surprised.

‘You looked like you needed that,’ Jack said, grinning, and then he shot off into the air, looking for Pitch.

*

Jack kept the wind close to him as he scouted for Pitch. He avoided panicked Nightmares that loathed the snow and were escaping the dome, he wheeled around fae that were fighting each other, and he made sure that the wind was there to scour away sound if he happened to see August.

He found Pitch destroying Nightmares. Gwyn was nearby, engaged in battle with an Unseelie fae who had cat ears and a three cat tails. In the distance, he could see August actively engaged in battle, standing with one hand formally behind his back and his rapier in front of him. He used it precisely, with a technique that married stillness with sudden bursts of exacting movement. After he’d run through two Seelie fae on the point of his sword, Jack decided he’d seen enough.

He didn’t land properly, hovering next to Pitch.

‘We have to go into the gymnasium,’ Jack said. ‘The Nain Rouge has killed a kid. There’s no snow in there. We have to go make it, maybe keep the shadows back or something.’

Jack looked out at the fleeing Nightmares and felt a rush of impatience.

‘Come on, we have to go.’

‘What’s happening?’ Gwyn said, joining them. His sword was covered in blood, and splatters of it stood out in stark relief on his cream-coloured armour. The sweat in his hair was turning the white-blond curls to ringlets, and there was blood staining some of it pink-red. For the first time, Jack started to get a glimpse of a brutal warrior beneath the charm. Not just someone who trained on drills or enjoyed the Wild Hunt. Here was a fae who knew how to get his way on a battlefield. Gwyn brushed snow out of his hair, and then looked up at the golden clouds above them.

‘How long is this going to fall for?’ Gwyn said.

‘Hours,’ Jack said, absently. ‘Look, can we go?’ Patty said the Nain Rouge had guns, but I’m pretty sure I can knock them out of commission now that she’s not catching us by surprise. We have to get the rest of the kids out of there. Otherwise there’s no point to all of this.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Gwyn said, raising his eyebrows. ‘I’m trying to repatriate the Seelie fae back to their rightful homes.’

‘Then *you* don’t have to come with us, do you?’ Jack said, he directed pleading eyes at Pitch.

Pitch nodded and Jack flew towards the school, Pitch following behind him, slicing out waves of light whenever a Nightmare crossed their path. Heavy footfalls next to Pitch meant that Gwyn was following. Jack realised, as he approached the school, that he had no idea where to enter. He fell back, and Gwyn pushed forward, taking them immediately through a glass door that one of his soldiers was guarding.

Immediately inside the foyer, Jack saw Bunnymund lying on the floor, soldiers pressing wads from sheets likely taken from the nurse’s office, to the shattered mess of his right hind-leg. Jack stopped and stared at the pool of blood beneath him, at how it matted his fur into thick, black clumps. Bunnymund’s ears were limp, but his eyes were fever-bright. When Pitch ran directly over to him, he tensed.

‘Did the bullets go through bone?’ Pitch asked, and one of the soldiers nodded.

‘A lot of shrapnel damage too.’

Jack saw Pitch’s whole body tense, and then remembered how Pitch had needed to remove the bullet from his body before he could start healing it with the golden light. He had a sudden image of Pitch digging through ruined flesh, looking for shrapnel, and he blanched. He hoped that wouldn’t mean that Pitch couldn’t help.

‘Bone is...complicated. And shrapnel...’ Pitch trailed off. He looked at Bunnymund, who was staring at him with a weak wariness. ‘I don’t know if I can heal this properly.’

‘Then go help the blasted children,’ Bunnymund said, and Pitch grimaced, pulling back the sheets and looking at what Jack could only call wreckage. It was a nasty wound.

‘We’ve removed some of the shrapnel,’ one of the soldiers said. ‘We had to stop, he was losing too much blood.’

‘May I scan it?’ Pitch said, enquiring with a gentle politeness. Bunnymund’s eyes narrowed, and then his head rested back on the tiles as though he couldn’t hold it up anymore.

‘I don’t think you could make it much worse. Bloody go for it.’

Pitch put his sword down and ran the golden light through Bunnymund’s leg. It didn’t seem to hurt him, but he stiffened all the same. Pitch looked concerned as he moved the light through his leg. Jack’s skin itched, they *had* to get the children out of there. They must be terrified. He wanted to tell Pitch to hurry up. He was torn between wanting to see Bunnymund healed and wanting to get in there and help the children.

‘I can heal some of this,’ Pitch said finally, ‘Will you let me?’

Bunnymund waved his paw in the air and then his whole body locked in on itself when Pitch thrust both of his hands into the wound. Jack’s muscles tensed in sympathy. He would never get used to that. It was one of the most invasive healing techniques he’d ever seen. Bunnymund didn’t make a

sound, but the whites of his eyes were visible as the golden light rayed heavily out of his wounds.

Pitch worked quickly, and Jack could tell it was because the golden light was stronger than it had ever been. With his right hand, he plucked out pieces of shrapnel and dropped them onto the ground beside him. With his left, he kept producing a steady, intense mass of light. He moved from location to location, methodically moving down Bunnymund's leg. Gwyn was leaning over Pitch, watching in amazement.

'Can I learn to do this?' he said, and Pitch shook his head once, concentrating.

'No,' he said, curt.

Gwyn stepped back, realising how much effort Pitch was expending, and came to Jack's side instead.

'You said you could put the guns out of commission. How?'

'If I see them, I can shoot ice at them. Encase them, freeze them. Guns don't work so well when there's shards in of ice in the barrel. Might even backfire,' Jack said with a grim smile.

'If we can disable the guns, the Nain Rouge will be easier to deal with,' Gwyn said, and Pitch made a sound of dissent.

'Wait for me,' Pitch said, shifting his hand and wincing in sympathy when Bunnymund jerked hard as Pitch pulled out a stubborn piece of shrapnel.

'We should do this now,' Jack said to Gwyn.

'I agree,' Gwyn said, and Pitch made a sound of frustration.

'I don't want him going in there without me,' Pitch gritted out, staring at the wound in front of him.

'You should trust him,' Gwyn said reprovingly, and Jack looked at Gwyn in surprise. Pitch bared his teeth at the wound, but it was obvious that he intended the expression for Gwyn. But he was concentrating too hard, and looked reluctant to leave the wound half-healed. Jack was surprised to see how much of it he had healed already. Bunnymund was staring up at the ceiling in awe, no longer radiating so much pain from his bunched muscles.

'Join us when you're done,' Gwyn commanded, and walked off in the direction of the gymnasium.

Jack followed, though he looked over his shoulder at Pitch, bowed over Bunnymund's wound. He wished Pitch was by his side, but he needed to get into that gymnasium. He needed to get the children out. He needed to get at the Nain Rouge.

'I don't like to use my light in battle, because it is dangerous, unpredictable. However, I can give you a temporary barrier,' Gwyn said in his businesslike manner of conducting war. 'It won't last long, but while it's up, we will be protected from the bullets. She can't pass it. But it will only last a minute or so.'

'Okay, that's better than nothing,' Jack said, gripping his staff and scowling as they moved quietly through the empty school.

*

There was no way to sneak into the gym. On the count of three, Gwyn burst in through the main entrance and put up the barrier of light. Jack saw through it to the rifles and handguns and shot sharp bursts of ice towards each of them. The Nain Rouge dropped the one she was holding, it was completely encased in a block of ice. She pulled out another from beneath her skins, shot at them, but the bullets couldn't penetrate the barrier. Jack sent ice at that too. She tried to avoid the burst of frost lightning, but Jack's aim was true, and the lightning moved jaggedly in the direction he wanted it to, zapping the gun from her hands.

As soon as he'd shot ice at the guns he could see, he noticed the rest of his surroundings and quailed. Shadows clung thickly to the gymnasium walls, reaching all the way up to the roof. They were *everywhere*. Living shadows swirled in puddles underneath terrified children pressed back up against the wall, they pooled underneath the Nain Rouge herself, they waved lazy tendrils and tentacles up from the ground and the walls. In some of the shadowy corners they were a thick, clotted mass, lurking, saturating the room with fear.

Jack gasped, even Gwyn seemed shocked.

The barrier died, and Jack's fear skyrocketed. He wanted to be gone. He did not want to be this close to this many living shadows. He'd had *no idea* that the Nain Rouge had gotten so strong. The gymnasium was infested with them.

He took in the children. At least fifty. They were huddled together. About ten feet away from the main group of children, Jack saw a small body, the blood beneath it. Nausea slammed into him, and his knees felt weak.

Stacey, Jack remembered, thinking of Patty's face as she'd said it. He flew forwards, eyeing the shadows warily. When he was closer to the Nain Rouge, he held out his staff. Anger galvanised him, but the fear the living shadows inspired chipped away at it. He had to act now, before he lost his nerve.

'Let the children go,' he said. 'You don't want them, right?'

'Bitch, *please*,' the Nain Rouge said, a gleeful cast to her dead eyes. 'You think you know what I want? You couldn't find your way out of a cereal box. Although,' she looked down at the frozen rifle by her feet. 'That's a neat trick. Can't wait to do it myself when I suck you dry.'

Jack dodged as tentacles of shadow suddenly reached hungrily towards him. Children screamed beneath him, and Jack's heart hammered in his chest. He wasn't fast enough. One of the tentacles touched him, started to wrap around him, and then suddenly it withdrew. Jack slowed, surprised. The Nain Rouge laughed.

'It's a fucking bluff, loser. August – the bitch – told me to leave you alone. Sorta. You're for him. Can't even wrap the shadows around you. Whatever.'

'Jack!' It was Pitch. Jack looked down to see Pitch standing in the doorway, holding his sword up in arms that were bloody up to the elbow. 'Stay *away* from August!'

'Yeah. Good luck with that,' the Nain Rouge said, as an emergency exit opened and August walked in, rapier sheathed by his side. August looked around at the shadows, and Jack thought he looked almost wary. But a moment later August was focused, and his eyes found Jack. Jack summoned a wind to him without words, it whipped at his sweatshirt and his hair, he hoped it would be enough.

Pitch had only just noticed all the shadows. He was looking around the gym, eyes wide, horrified. His eyes fell on August, then he looked up at Jack as though checking he was still there.

Gwyn stepped forwards into the centre of the gymnasium, his armoured boots ringing out on the floor.

‘August Each Uisge, I expected better, from you, of all fae. We used to be friends, you and I.’

Jack blinked hard. *Friends?* Did the distinctions between Seelie and Unseelie mean nothing to these guys?

‘What can I say?’ August said, leaning back against one of the few patches of wall bare of living shadows in the gymnasium. ‘I became terribly bored. The shadows interested me. Perhaps I just wanted to spend my time differently, for a change.’

His eyes flicked up to Jack, and Jack looked away quickly. It felt wrong to look away from a mortal enemy, but he knew it was the best way to avoid being compelled. August laughed, and Jack’s teeth clenched. In the background, children were quietly crying.

‘You have ousted fae from their rightful homes,’ Gwyn said, his voice booming through the gym. ‘This is a crime whether Seelie or Unseelie, and you know it, August. Did you think you wouldn’t be called to task? You have breached our covenant with the humans, forcing us into the mundane and the every day, making us *visible*, when you know that this is not our way. You will be made to answer for what you’ve done.’

The Each Uisge squeezed some water out of his wet hair, and then looked up, radiating disinterest.

Several of the children made exclamations of surprise when Bunnymund hobbled back in, the skin mostly knitted over his wound. It looked fragile, and his lower half was still covered in blood, but the children looked happy to see him. Jack was even happy to see him.

However, as soon as Bunnymund got close to the children, the Nain Rouge flicked over a wave of shadows that sent Bunnymund sprawling.

‘Hey!’ Jack shouted, sending a bolt of frost lightning at her. She blocked it with a wall of shadow, which quickly melted back into the pool of moving darkness beneath her feet. Jack shot down to the ground, landing tentatively on the gymnasium floor near Gwyn.

‘Let the children go!’ Jack yelled. August shook his head slowly. But it was the Nain Rouge who answered.

‘When someone takes a bunch of kids hostage, Frosty, normally it’s polite to ask the kidnapper her terms. So go on then. What are your terms? Maybe if you give me some of that tasty, tasty frost, I’ll let a few of them go.’

Jack snarled.

‘I’m giving you *nothing*. Let the kids go. And give me my life-force back. I want my power back.’

He hadn’t expected to say that, but once said, he realised that even if though he didn’t hold much hope out that he’d ever get it back – he had to say it. He had to demand his soul back. There was no way he would have been able to keep that inside of him. His soul – even now – cried out for the part of itself that was missing.

The Nain Rouge looked at August, and August nodded at her, an unknown communication moving between them. The Nain Rouge looked at Jack, a creepy, hungry smile crawling over her face.

‘Oh, you want your power back, Jack? You want it?’ The Nain Rouge spoke with condescension

and mock pity, her eyes opaque and empty as she faced him, two wells of dried blood leading all the way down into the dark. 'How about you take it *all*.'

She swung her arms back and then thrust them forwards. A spiral of blue frost curled up and out of the Nain Rouge's hands, and Jack swore that his heart stopped to see it again. His soul lurched forwards in his own body, recognising the remainder of itself, wanting it so badly that he thought he'd turn himself inside out to get close to it again.

But behind the frost, shadows poured out of the Nain Rouge's palms, and they swelled up into a giant wave, cresting towards him. Children shrieked and screamed.

How about you take it all.

'No,' Jack whispered, and his mouth continued to shape the word. 'No, no, no.'

August watched smugly nearby. Pitch screamed something at Jack. But Jack felt frozen as the shadows pushed towards him, swelling in a writhing mass of darkness. There was so much of it. He couldn't even see the spiral of frost anymore, it was lost in the black. The Nain Rouge was laughing, the sound jagged, cutting at the heart of him.

He jerked when he felt something underneath his foot, and shrieked when he saw a formless shadow wrap around his ankle, swarming up through the gymnasium floor.

It pushed up from the ground and *into* his foot. He cried out, trying to jerk his foot out of its grip, but he couldn't get himself free. He felt the darkness twisting inside of him, getting comfortable, turning him colder than he ever thought possible. It was as though an abyss had opened up in his bones, it turned his mind to jelly. He quaked. It was alien and *wrong* and he screamed without thinking, a wail of appeal.

Jack screamed again, trying to tear his leg free of the shadow, causing pain to rip up through his leg. It wasn't working. He was *trapped*.

He remembered standing outside in the snow as Pitch reluctantly let him know that the wound that the Nain Rouge had torn open inside of him would potentially make him vulnerable to being possessed by the shadows, as Pitch had been. Pitch's arm had tightened in response around his shoulders and at the time Jack had been able to push the thought from his mind, because it was too horrible to think about it, because it just wasn't *possible*. After all-

He remembered Ondine's face when she had told him that she saw shadows in his future. That she couldn't see until the end of his tomorrow. That she didn't see death, but that she saw *shadows*. Her eyes had been sad and huge and filled with confusion, and he hadn't wanted to see any truth in what she-

Shadows.

Jack screamed, hysterical, pointing his staff down and blasting the shadow by his feet with frost lightning, cutting his foot at the same time, splitting the skin. It only pushed deeper, wrapped around the bones of his ankle. He felt it there, twisting amongst sinew and muscle. He sensed its awareness of him, hungry, merciless, malicious and connected to something much, much larger.

He looked up, the wave of shadows was quivering over him. It reached up to the roof of the gymnasium and he could feel its mass, its intent. He could feel it through the shadow that sought entrance to him, creeping inch by inch up through his leg. It was hungry. It wanted a home. It sensed the emptiness inside of him. The emptiness that had been growing larger and larger over

time. The emptiness ripe to be colonised with darkness.

A blast of golden light slammed into the shadow at his foot, and Jack screamed in agony as his whole lower leg felt like it had been burned from the inside. The shadow recoiled, withdrew, and Pitch pushed it back towards the Nain Rouge, sweeping his sword forwards and sending a huge beam of golden light into the heart of the shadows.

Jack stumbled backwards, wincing as his bleeding foot flared with pain a second time. He couldn't tear his eyes away as Pitch sent wave after aggressive wave of golden light at the bulk of the shadows; it was nothing like training, it was nothing like the military drills. He seemed to understand the shadows instinctively, pre-empting their movements, altering his stance and blocking waves of darkness that attempted to push past him. Jack shuddered and then gagged when he realised that the shadows were trying to weave their way past Pitch specifically so they could reach *Jack*.

Pitch was only just keeping the shadows back, working harder and harder to try and force a retreat. But every swathe he destroyed with the golden light just made room for more of the black, fathomless masses to swarm forwards.

There are so many.

Pitch couldn't make the golden light forever, and he'd said that one warrior wouldn't be enough. Could never be enough. Jack turned to see where Gwyn was, to tell him to help out, but Gwyn was dealing with a section of shadows that had broken off and were threatening the *children*. Gwyn was clearly using all of his concentration to defend them, even as Bunnymund tried to direct them out of the building.

Jack turned back and saw Augustus staring at him, one corner of his mouth lifted up. He leaned against the wall of the gymnasium with a casual insouciance, one leg over the other, arms folded. It seemed wrong that he looked so unconcerned as Pitch was throwing his all into keeping the shadows back. Jack pointed his staff at Augustus with a shaking arm, breathing hard, wishing he could smash the waterhorse out of existence.

Augustus' only reaction was a brief smile of amused acknowledgement.

Jack started to summon the frost lightning from his core, when Pitch shouted something at the shadows. Pitch staggered forward, and the shadows retreated, and then surged forward yet again. Pitch screamed words at the shadows that were nothing like the English language; it was the Lunar language, Jack realised. It was meant for the shadows alone.

But the shadows wouldn't stop, they kept coming. Jack saw a coiling mass of it shooting past Pitch directly at him, and he spun around, shooting up into the air.

He felt them, hot and strong for something so amorphous. They slapped hard around his leg and suckered to him like a tentacle. Sounds ripped out of his mouth as he turned and attempted to blast himself free with the frost lightning, but the frost only shattered against the shadows as they crawled up his leg. He was injuring himself, but he couldn't stop. Better to be injured, than let the shadows enter him.

This couldn't happen, he could not let this happen. *This isn't happening*. It was too much like his horrible nightmare of the Nain Rouge, the shadows weren't supposed to be this strong, there weren't supposed to be this many of them. Terror streaked through him and left him numb.

We'll never be ready.

'Pitch!' The name echoed through the gymnasium, and Pitch looked back once, eyes widening and face contorting with fear. Jack couldn't spare him another glance as the shadow crept further up his leg. It hadn't pushed beneath the barrier of his skin, but it was only a matter of time. He could feel its intent, its voracity. He clawed at it, frost poured out of his hands, but the shadows clung, impervious to his attacks.

A sudden boom, and the air was split with golden light. Jack gasped and fell back towards the ground as the coil let him go. He landed badly. He pushed himself upright with his staff, and blinked – blinded – at what he saw before him.

Pitch wasn't just creating the light with his sword, his whole body was incandescent with it. He was glowing from the inside, rays of light pushed out of the sleeves of his robe, shined around his face, cascaded out from the collar of his undershirt. It shone out of every pore, turning his eyes lambent. Still he swept wave after wave of light with his sword, but he used the mass of light radiating from his body to push forwards and force the shadows into retreat. Jack had never seen anything like it in his life. He'd never even heard Pitch talk about being able to do it.

Maybe he didn't know he could.

Augus Each Uisge stepped away from the gymnasium wall, alarmed. He turned to the Nain Rouge, hiding behind the wall of shadows and said something to her that Jack couldn't catch.

Pitch's chest heaved with his breaths as he pressed his advantage, but the shadows were endless.

Jack felt his heart drop through his chest when Pitch dropped to one leg, suddenly, beneath the onslaught.

'Come on, Pitch,' Jack whispered. *'Come on.'*

The light Pitch was making with his body guttered, like a candle flame before a strong wind. Jack's eyes widened in horror. Pitch looked back at Jack, and then faced forwards with renewed resolve, but the flare of light he produced guttered again only a few seconds later.

'No,' Jack breathed.

Behind him, Gwyn yelled something at Pitch, but Jack was beyond comprehending what anyone else was saying. He could focus on nothing but Pitch, *his* Pitch, the man who had saved him from the malicious intent of the Nain Rouge more than once, who had held him and wrapped arms around him and traced hands through his hair. Pitch who was broken and sad and determined and focused and even playful and dry when the mood took him.

Jack could see only Pitch, shaking as his muscles fought to prevent the golden light from dying, his whole body struggling to keep the shadows at bay.

Pitch who turned to look at Jack with a terrible expression on his face, a despair and desperation that was awful to behold.

'I'm sorry,' Pitch mouthed.

The light guttered again, and the shadows swirled around Pitch, blocking him from view. It was as though their focus had changed. Pitch still directed the golden light with his sword, but it was weaker now, it wasn't lasting as long, it wasn't destroying as much of the darkness.

Pitch's face became clear through the whirling shadows again and he was still staring at Jack.

'Jack.'

Jack moaned thinly, paralysed.

Pitch's whole body went into spasm, and Jack ran forwards only to feel arms wrap around his middle and drag him back. He clawed at the armour around him, froze it, but it wouldn't shift. Jack stared ahead, blinked away tears.

'Save me,' Pitch shaped the words.

The golden light died.

The ground began to shake beneath their feet, a rumble that caused the evacuated children outside to start screaming again. Shadows that had previously been trying to reach past Pitch to possess Jack changed their focus. August stared between them both, eyes wide, mouth thin. A tornado of heaving shadows swirled around Pitch, and he disappeared beneath them.

The rumbling became louder, every shadow in the gymnasium turned its focus around and shot towards the tornado, whirled around Pitch hungrily.

Jack was struggling as fiercely as he could against whatever was holding him back. He was going to rip those shadows apart with his bare hands. He was going to find Pitch and drag him out, he had to, there was nothing else he could do. A howling wind wouldn't abandon the gymnasium, raced around it, a cacophony of noise. August Each Uisge watched the tornado of shadows around Pitch with an avarice that could almost have been horror, if Jack had seen that expression on anyone else's face.

Jack became aware of a wetness in his throat, a terrible shouting that wouldn't stop. He wanted the shouting to go away so he could concentrate, so he could get himself free from his restraints, but the shouting went on and on and on.

He was screaming *'Pitch!'* and *'No!'* and *'Let me go!'* His voice was ragged. He couldn't stop.

He found himself shaken violently by whatever held him back. He blinked, dazed, and the arms still wouldn't let him go.

'You can't do anything! I'm sorry, Jack, you can't!' Gwyn was hanging onto him. Hanging onto him and not out saving Pitch with his own golden light. Jack snarled and twisted to face Gwyn, reached up with hands to try and claw at the fae's face, only to find ribs being squeezed until they nearly cracked.

'Jack!' Gwyn's voice pushed into his ear on an urgent hiss. *'He's going through this so you won't have to!'*

Jack slumped, trembling, and the arms around him relaxed their awful, tight grip. He realised dimly that if Pitch couldn't keep up the golden light then there was no way Gwyn would be able to. There was nothing anyone could do, now.

The shadows began to disappear, and a terrible, echoing laughter reverberated around them. It was a laughter which sank hooks into Jack's whole body. It was familiar. He didn't want to recognise it, but he did. He sagged in Gwyn's grip, and Gwyn adjusted his arms, now holding him up, instead of holding him back.

Pitch's sword was suddenly ejected with violence from the mass of shadows, hitting a wall and clattering to the ground.

The last of the shadows that weren't attached directly to the Nain Rouge funnelled directly into a larger being wearing a black robe, a triumphant gleam in his golden eyes.

Jack's throat clutched at a whimper. Something important broke inside of him.

The Nightmare King looked around him, shadows massing beneath him, clinging to him, smudging his face and neck, turning him into a vector of darkness. His golden eyes lingered in recognition when they reached Augus, and then passed around the gymnasium, a cold confidence emanating from his whole body.

He was taller than Jack remembered; greater, somehow. This was not a Nightmare King who wanted to be recognised through bringing children nightmares, this was a Nightmare King capable of destroying entire planets without a second thought. He was like a black hole standing in the centre of the gym, drawing everyone's gaze towards him.

This isn't happening.

The Nightmare King turned back to the Nain Rouge, and then stalked towards her so quickly she didn't have time to defend herself. He grabbed her by the throat with a massive hand and lifted her so that they were at eye level, her feet dangling off the ground. Her hands came up, stuck dirty, bloody claws into him, and he snarled at her with jagged, uneven teeth, hands tightening.

'You *took* something from me, and that's not *nice*,' he said, shaking her by the throat for emphasis. 'Don't you know you're supposed to *share*?'

Jack watched in horror as the Nightmare King thrust his free hand beneath the Nain Rouge's uncured skins and leathers. He rummaged around beneath them, ignoring the way she clawed his forearms until blood began to drip from the base of his wrists. At first Jack thought she was being molested, but the Nightmare King suddenly grinned in delight and tore something away from her body. The Nain Rouge yelped, struggled harder.

The Nightmare King held up a silk scarf that had been tied to the Nain Rouge's torso. It was dark violet, and covered in silver Sanskrit that had been hand-painted onto it. He laughed when he saw it.

'So you *do* fear, and you *did* block it,' he let the scarf flutter to the ground and his hand tightened around the Nain Rouge's throat. He stepped forwards and slammed her into the wall, seeking eye contact with her even as she tried to avoid it.

A forceful hand on her chin brought her face up, and the Nightmare King made eye contact, holding her in the grip of his gaze.

'Now, where are they?' he said playfully. The Nain Rouge's legs kicked the wall behind her, kicked out at him, but his arm was so long and he was able to arch out of the way. She stilled and then shuddered, and the Nightmare King's eyes lit up with triumph. 'Ah, *there*.'

Even without being in the direct line of that gaze, Jack felt fear build inside him, even as the Nightmare King built it in the Nain Rouge. She fought him viciously, slipping from struggling into outright panic, her movements turning clumsy and incoherent. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his, and when her mouth opened into a silent scream, Jack couldn't tell if he felt vindication that she was being treated this way, or if he pitied her. He'd wanted her dead. He'd even wanted to see her tortured, but he didn't know if he wanted *this*.

The Nightmare King shook her again, and swirls of shadows began to spiral lazily out of her palms

and feet. They crawled along his body, entered through his mouth and eyes, through his fingertips and slipped into the tops of his boots. Jack realised Pitch was taking back all of it, taking everything he could get his hands on. It wasn't just the shadows that he was absorbing, but traces of other powers, a spiral of green, a spiral of shimmering orange. He took it all, until the Nain Rouge's eyes rolled back in her head, until tears of blood streaked her face.

'Look at you,' the Nightmare King purred with derision. 'Pathetic. That someone who likes taking so much cannot *stand* being taken from.'

He stepped back and withdrew his hand from her throat, and the Nain Rouge fell heavily to the ground, unconscious. She didn't move.

The Nightmare King laughed deep in his throat, stared down at her with satisfaction.

Then he looked over at August Each Uisge. August's face shifted from one of shock, to a strange, predatory excitement.

'So,' the Nightmare King said lightly, 'I see you have an opening. Are you currently hiring? I would like an application.'

The Each Uisge's eyebrows lifted. They both laughed together, and when August walked over and stared at the Nightmare King with something very like adoration, Jack's stomach heaved on a gag. Gwyn was breathing shallowly behind him, fear turning his normally steady breaths into something far less stable.

'I rather thought,' August said, reaching up and hesitating, before tracing the back of his hand over the Nightmare King's cheek with a familiarity that made Jack's skin crawl, 'that you preferred to work alone.'

'The times, they are a-changing,' the Nightmare King half-sang and August bared his teeth in something that was almost a smile.

Pitch is in there somewhere. My Pitch.

Jack broke free of Gwyn's arms easily, as August and the Nightmare King began to walk out of the gymnasium together.

'Pitch!' Jack shouted, 'you have to fight this!'

His voice was wrecked, he swallowed blood and realised he'd wounded the inside of his throat in his hysteria.

When the Nightmare King turned to face him, Jack stumbled backwards and then couldn't move, locked within a paralysing fear. Brief, long-distance eye contact was enough. The Nightmare King was definitely more powerful than he used to be.

'Didn't you want to break him?' he said casually to August, who shrugged.

'It can wait. It would be rude to do so now, here. I prefer no audience.'

'Oh, how I remember what you prefer. It's no matter, there's still plenty of time,' the Nightmare King said. He surged over rapidly in a huge wave of shadows. Jack was separated from Gwyn, surrounded by a funnel of black. He didn't want the shadows to invade him, didn't want to remember what it felt like as they pushed inside of his body. He was terrified that he would be possessed, that the shadows would take him.

The Nightmare King laughed, and Jack saw no trace of Pitch in those golden eyes. Instead, he felt a sense of déjà vu; of standing in Antarctica and having his staff broken by someone who had expertly manipulated him. Of chasing shadows through an underground lair, only to have his fears rummaged through and tossed around him until he thought his head would implode. And that had been a far paler incarnation of whatever he was looking at now.

‘Jack Frost,’ the Nightmare King said.

Jack’s heart was breaking. He kept expecting just a glimpse of Pitch, just *something*. He knew he had to get Pitch back, somehow, but he wanted a reassurance, a reminder. Numbness swept through him when he couldn’t find it, and something hard formed around his heart; a shell of ice.

The Nightmare King cocked his head thoughtfully, and then a cruel smile twisted his face.

‘Oh, you two, thinking you had something *special*. And yet where is he, Jack? I guess he really is going somewhere after all. That Kozmotis, unable to keep his promises.’

Jack choked down his cry, it came out strangled.

I’m not going anywhere.

Jack stomped down on his own pain, forced it deep inside of him, pushed it under until he could concentrate again. If he thought about it too hard now, about what he’d lost, about what he might never be able to get back...

‘I will *destroy* you,’ Jack whispered, his voice shaking, the words breaking on the raggedness in his own throat.

‘I think I’m going to beat you to that particular finish line, but let’s enjoy the race, shall we? After all, we were *lovers* once. I’ve been *inside* you.’ The words were a drawl of mockery and Jack’s hands fisted even as they shook.

‘*You* haven’t, *Pitch* has,’ Jack said, his voice firming. It had never been so easy to see the distinction between the Nightmare King and Pitch, it didn’t matter if they wore the same face, shared the same body.

The Nightmare King looked down at him, measuring. And then he looked up sharply when a sword limned in golden light thrust through the funnel of shadow. It was quickly pushed back, but the Nightmare King shook his head in mock regret all the same.

‘Can’t have the King of the Seelie fae mad at me, now, can we? Guess I’ll be seeing you around.’

Jack flinched when a warm hand stroked the underside of his chin. He tried to step backwards, but the shadows kept him hemmed in, and the fingers underneath his chin turned cruel around his jaw, holding him still with a bruising force.

‘Sweet dreams, Jack Frost.’

The Nightmare King released Jack from the funnel of shadows and glared at Gwyn, who had his sword up, struggling to make more of the golden light.

Augus Each Uisge held his hand out, an invitation, and the Nightmare King took it as they walked towards the exit. Jack stared at them in confusion. Pain shimmered through him, never quite settling, separate from his body and inside it at the same time. He couldn’t believe it. There was no room in his head for what had just occurred.

‘Augus, halt!’ Gwyn shouted, and both Augus and the Nightmare King turned back.

The Nightmare King stepped forward and Gwyn grunted, his whole body stiffened. Jack shivered when he realised that even from this distance, the Nightmare King was subduing someone as powerful as Gwyn with the eye trick. It was only a matter of seconds before Gwyn was down on his knees, trembling as he tried to resist the terror that the Nightmare King was evoking. Only when Gwyn absently dropped his sword to the ground did the Nightmare King finally look away, offering an easy smile to Augus. Gwyn gasped as though he had been starved of oxygen.

‘There’s been a change of plans, Gwyn ap Nudd,’ the Each Uisge called out. ‘But don’t fret. You’ll get your chance to deal with me soon enough, I am sure. I find I’m rather looking forward to it.’

They turned around, continued to walk towards the exit.

Jack knew in his heart, deep down – beneath the shell of ice that was hardening around it – that Pitch had saved him from the shadows and asked to be saved in turn. There was a terrible resolve thickening around him, turning the play inside of him to focus and determination, turning the fire in his heart to a hard piece of coal.

As the Nightmare King exited, he tossed something over his shoulder casually. It fell to the ground with a light, metallic clink.

Jack bolted forward before anyone could catch him. Different people were shouting his name, but he couldn’t hear them. The world was filtering through strangely. He knew he would never be the same again, he knew that his anchor had disappeared, and yet he couldn’t feel it. He didn’t want to ever feel it. His throat was still bleeding from when he’d screamed it raw, and he knew if he let himself feel the pain of what happened...he didn’t think he’d survive.

He skidded down onto his knees and dropped his staff onto the floor when he saw what the Nightmare King had thrown away so easily. It was a sign that things truly were different this time around. He’d never thrown it away before. He’d never treated it like a piece of rubbish.

Jack closed his fingers around the locket until his hand was shaking and it was cutting into his palm. If Pitch was trapped too far beneath the shadows to keep it safe, Jack would have to do it for him. It was all he could do, until he found his way through the shadows back to the man he loved.

Chapter End Notes

TO BE CONTINUED in 'Into Shadows We Fall.'

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As I've been getting a lot of questions regarding the sequel, some brief housekeeping facts (with some spoilers):

- * It will be longer than *From the Darkness We Rise*.
- * It WILL have a happy ending.
- * This is not the last you'll be seeing of Pitch Black.

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